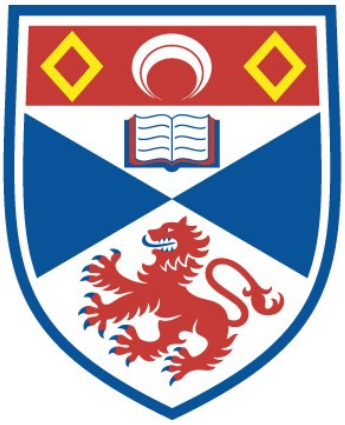
MONEY AND CHARACTER IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

Julian Crowe

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



1998

Money and character in the novels of Charles Dickens

Julian Crowe

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the University of St Andrews

22 April 1998

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

Th D 23

Declarations

I, Julian Crowe, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 125,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

date: 17/11/97 signature of candidate: ..

I was admitted as a research student in October, 1991, and as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in October, 1992; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1991 and 1997.

date: 17/11/97 signature of candidate: .....

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

date: 18 Nov 97 signature of supervisor: .....

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. I also understand that the title and abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any *bona fide* library or research worker.

date: 17/11/97 signature of candidate: ....

Acknowledgements

There are many ways in which I am indebted to the University of St Andrews. I owe a great deal to my earlier teachers, Professor Ian Kidd and Professor Kenneth Dover of the Department of Greek, and Roger Squires of the Department of Logic and Metaphysics. I am very grateful to the School of English for accepting me as a part-time research student. My colleagues in Information Technology Services have given me support and encouragement. Many others throughout the University have offered encouragement and advice, and have allowed me to talk about Dickens when I should have been attending to their computers. I am grateful to the examining committee for obliging me to expand the introduction, which I feel has made the thesis better.

Above all I am grateful to my wife and children for supporting me in such a long and unsociable undertaking, and to my supervisor, Phillip Mallett, for his unfailing kindness throughout the last seven years and for his generous and fertile criticism.

Abstract

This thesis discusses the relationship between money and character in the novels of Charles Dickens, concentrating mainly on the later novels, from *Dombey & Son* onwards. Money is extremely important in Dickens's social criticism, and he is always conscious of money-related motives in his conception of character. However, despite its importance and omnipresence, money ought not to be elevated into the key explanatory principle in Dickens's thought. Dickens has been valued for different qualities over the years. Many who value him as an entertainer with a powerful poetic imagination tend to undervalue his social criticism and moralising, and to treat those aspects as non-essential or as belonging to a different side of his life and work. On the other hand those who value him as social and moral critic have combined this with exaggerated claims of thematic coherence. This thesis suggests that we can dispense with such claims while still regarding Dickens's novels as serious contributions to the moral and social debates of his day. A close consideration will be given to most of the later novels, with the intention of placing the money themes alongside other themes, so as to emphasise the many-sidedness of Dickens's social and moral criticism. Other themes explored in the thesis include marriage and the home, and hypocrisy and self-deception. The thesis seeks to do justice to Dickens's thorough-going ambivalence towards money, and to his capacity for revisiting characters and themes from one work to another. The bias of the thesis is towards the personal and individual, but money is inevitably a social topic. Much consideration is therefore given to Dickens's fictional and non-fictional responses to contemporary social problems and attitudes, and also to material not written by Dickens but published by him in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.

Contents

Introduction

There is a moment in *Our Mutual Friend* when it strikes Silas Wegg that perhaps Mr Boffin might prove honest, but he dismisses this possibility, and repeats the comforting formula: 'He's grown too fond of money for that.' (*OMF* III 8 p565) Wegg is a bitter parody of the Dickensian deprived hero and the loveable characters who are softened by suffering and enlightened by poverty. We can see his hard, narrow, grasping character as the consequence of his grinding poverty, but if this understanding inclines us to sympathy, Dickens does nothing to encourage it. My thesis looks at the relationship between money and the formation and portrayal of character in Dickens's novels. Its negative argument is that we should neither look for a simple cause and effect relationship, nor ascribe to money a unique explanatory role in our understanding of character. This applies both to the particular Wegg view that having money and being fond of it must inevitably corrupt Mr Boffin, and to the general view of character as determined by social and economic conditions. The negative point is made first by emphasising Dickens's ambivalence towards money, and secondly by drawing attention to other important themes which are, to a greater or less degree, independent of money. The positive argument of the thesis is contained in its exploration of Dickens's strong and abiding interest in money, and of the fruitful money-related themes that he returns to repeatedly in his representation of character, themes such as the home, benefactors, self-improvement and respectability. There are moral and social implications to be found in Dickens's work, and these are not extraneous matter, tacked on to give local colour, or to make the fun and the poetry more respectable in an age devoted to social and moral improvement, but an integral part of what the books are about. Unfortunately, many who have written persuasively about Dickens's social and moral insights have tended to distort the case by insisting too much on the overall coherence of his message or by tying their arguments for Dickens's moral and social seriousness to exaggerated claims about the thematic unity of the novels. The point of the thesis is to show that it is not necessary to

make such claims of thorough-going consistency and thematic unity in order to vindicate Dickens's novels as serious contributions to the moral and social debates of his time.

The mid-nineteenth century in England was a money-getting age. It knew it was so, and prided itself on being so, and blamed itself for being so. Enfeebled Calvinism and half-baked economic theory provided a comforting ideology for the uncritical: providence and the market would make all well. The sea would always teem with fish for men to catch, and American ingenuity, powered by the search for profit, would always come up with engineering answers to social problems. Those who thought, or saw, or felt more clearly were conscious of the contradictions, and they could hear the footsteps of the mob breaking in upon their complacency. The references to teeming seas and American ingenuity are both taken from articles in *All the Year Round* in the early sixties. Dickens's periodicals contain many such optimistic notes, but they also have a darker side, as for example in the 'Chamber of Horrors' articles with which *All the Year Round* sought to shame the authorities into a more effective administration of poor relief.

The contradictions in the prevailing orthodoxy which emerge from a consideration of Dickens can be expressed in several ways. If there is one aspect of Christianity that Dickens subscribes to without reserve it is probably the parable of the Good Samaritan, with its unequivocal and absolute assertion that we should succour fellow humans in need. And yet he knows from experience that charitable action is not easy. He is conscious too of the theory which says that interference with the harsh workings of the market will impede capitalism's work of bringing about a progressive improvement in the conditions of life – the theory expounded, for example, by Plantagenet Palliser:

> There is no vulgar error so vulgar, – that is to say, common or erroneous, – as that by which men have been taught to say that mercenary tendencies are bad. A desire for wealth is the source of all progress. Civilization comes from what men call greed. Let your mercenary tendencies be combined with honesty and they cannot take you astray.
>
> (*Can You Forgive Her?* ch25)

Like Gradgrind, Dickens knows that the Good Samaritan is a Bad Economist. When Dickens feels and imagines, his world is one of plenty and generosity, but when he thinks he falls under the ideological spell of Malthusian economics and accepts its harsh prescriptions. He cannot refute the economists' logic, but like Captain Cuttle, he comes back again and again with his tongs and spoon and watch, the equally irrefutable answer of the imagination. Or he is like Joe, confronted by Pumblechook's gloomy parable of pork with its denial of all hope and humanity, unable to respond except by ladling out quantities of consolatory gravy.

The footsteps that are breaking in upon us – why should we listen to them? Is it simply because they belong to people who are suffering, or is it because they belong to mobs who, if we're not careful, will overturn our comfortable world? Both responses are found in Dickens. Despite the lowering of domestic tension through the fifties, and the growing belief in the possibility of compromise and reform, revolution was still a live enough theme when Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*, but perhaps by then it was seen by the complacent as something that happened abroad, like the Indian Mutiny. If so, fear of revolution was quickly replaced by the fear of crime. In some ways crime is a less frightening bogey, because criminals can be singled out, removed, punished, disposed of. On the other hand there is something arbitrary, irrational and personal about the threat posed by the solitary criminal. Instead of a mob expending its energy on attacking the social order, there is the lurking ruffian, Orlick in his dusty clothes, or Riderhood with his sinister catchphrases, the garotter who stalked the London streets and exercised the imagination of the comfortable in the sixties.

Dickens's sympathy for the poor and dispossessed was always expanding and contracting. As he and his contemporaries become more pre-occupied with the treatment of criminals, perhaps the less sympathetic face is more regularly turned towards the poor. The insight that poverty, vice, crime and disease are all connected is an important insight, and gave the impetus for much social reform.

But it has its accompanying danger, the tendency to see all four as a composite whole, and to propose hygienic solutions for crime and penal solutions for poverty. Dickens's responses to these issues show him to be both a product and a critic of his society, and indeed it is one of the features of the society that it produced many powerful critics. At one moment he is, as Chesterton says, a one-man mob in opposition to the cold Victorian compromise,[1] at another he is acting as mouthpiece for the Victorian bourgeoisie, while at another the two roles come together as he articulates the fury of the comfortable at the soft-hearted treatment of ruffians.

Despite this complex relationship with 'Victorianism' Dickens fell victim to the long anti-Victorian reaction of the early twentieth century, when he was often seen as part of an ungrown-up society that could laugh over Pickwick and cry over Little Nell. Two cardinal works appeared in 1941, Humphry House's *The Dickens World*, and Edmund Wilson's 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', both representing Dickens's social criticism as something deeper and darker than the fulminations of Mr Popular Sentiment exposing notorious abuses.[2] Post-war social and cultural historians continued to reclaim and promote Dickens the social critic. This approach informs the work of critics such as John Lucas and Philip Hobsbaum.[3] Meanwhile the Leavises were re-assessing Dickens and producing what Ella Westland calls their 'recantation'. [4] What these writers have in common is a determination to give a faithful reading of the novels, while engaging with Dickens in terms of their own moral and intellectual concerns.

---

1 *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913; Oxford, 1966) ch1 pp32f.

2 *The Dickens World* (London, 1941; 2nd edition 1942); 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', reprinted in Edmund Wilson, *Eight Essays* (New York, 1956).

3 Lucas, *The Melancholy Man* (Brighton 1970; 2nd edition 1980); Hobsbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* (London 1972).

4 Q. D. & F. R. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London, 1970; Harmondsworth, 1983). See the *Dickens Quarterly* series 'Dickens and Critical Change' by Ella Westland and Simon Tresize (1993-95) in particular Ella Westland, 'The Making of Dickens: Conflicts in Criticism 1940-1970', *Dickens Quarterly*, 1993 pp208-218. Other writers who emphasise the position of Wilson's essay include John Gross in the Introduction to Gross & Pearson, *Dickens in the Twentieth Century* (London 1962).

The case for a profound and serious Dickens is put repeatedly in passages such as this:

> From *Bleak House* onwards, the great novels have about them a fierce integrity of purpose which makes them central statements and judgements of Victorian England. They are written out of Dickens's deep and unswerving sense of responsibility, both to his art and to his audience.
>
> (*The Melancholy Man* ch6 p203)

These 'judgements of Victorian England' are almost invariably adverse:

> Thus, the theme of *Bleak House* is the individual in the toils of the Law; in *Hard Times* he is imprisoned by Industry; in *Great Expectations* by Class; in *Our Mutual Friend* by Money; while in *Little Dorrit* the theme is imprisonment itself – prison as a society, and all Society as a prison. In these novels, incidents, characters, strands of plot, lines of action, the pattern of symbolism and the evocative prose all subserve and act out the great Dickens theme: the individual against the System.
>
> (*A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* Introduction p14)

The sort of approach to Dickens that grows out of ideas like these is very appealing, but it goes wrong when it seems to equate seriousness with having, in Hobsbaum's words, a 'great theme'.

The title of this thesis might raise the expectation that I am going to treat money as the great theme. Evidently money is very important in Dickens:

> Money is a main theme of nearly every book that Dickens wrote: getting, keeping, spending, owing, bequeathing provide the intricacies of his plots; character after character is constructed round an attitude to money.
>
> (*The Dickens World* ch3 p58)

It would be tempting to follow up the phrase *constructed round* and conclude that money is central to Dickens's conception and representation of character. *Central* is not very useful here. If it is a synonym for 'important' then it is clear enough, but *central* usually implies more than mere importance, implies, in fact, a unique position, a key explanatory role. My reading of the novels leaves me reluctant to believe that anything is central in this sense, not even in the context of a particular novel, let alone in the whole work. It is not only that one can point to many aspects of the novels to which money is not central, but rather that the idea of centrality, or of a great theme to which all aspects of a novel are subservient, does not seem appropriate to Dickens.

The architectural unity of Dickens's novels

Orwell, in a famous phrase, describes Dickens's writing as 'rotten architecture, but wonderful gargoyles', and much Dickens criticism accepts the implied dichotomy between detail and structure.[5] The Leavises, for example, insist that concentration on the gargoyles, the 'characters', obscures the complex architecture which they so painstakingly expose. For them, the greatness of the works of Dickens's maturity lies in their coherence of argument and unity of theme.

> We wish to make it impossible ... to assert or assume that any character from the novels of Dickens's maturity might have equally appeared in any other of the novels than the one in which it in fact functions as an inseparable part of the whole.
>
> (*Dickens the Novelist* Preface p9)

John Carey would have us damn the architecture as a distraction from the poetry of the gargoyles.[6] For him the search for dominant symbols and organizing themes can only highlight a weakness in Dickens for flabby sermonising, while ignoring his strength, which lies in his teeming poetic imagination. It would be a caricature of Carey's book to suggest that he treats the characters, images and general furniture of Dickens entirely out of context, in the way suggested by the Leavises, just as it would be a caricature of their book to apply to it Carey's strictures on

> ... critics who labour to unearth [the novels'] 'meanings', as if great works of art were to be cherished, in the last resort, for whatever moral droppings can be coaxed from them.
>
> (*The Violent Effigy* p10)

And yet neither caricature is altogether unfair. We are dealing with two opposed approaches to Dickens, one asking us to respond imaginatively to the gargoyles, and the other claiming that a true appreciation of the work depends an understanding of the architecture.

---

5 'Charles Dickens' Reprinted in Orwell, *Decline of the English Murder & other essays* (Harmondsworth 1965) p133. I shall return repeatedly to this essay, not because it is always right but because it is so full of the sense that Dickens *matters*. It is fairly evident that Orwell did not re-read through all the novels when writing the essay (there are little mistakes like calling Littimer Latimer, and Coketown Cokestown) and it is in this that much of its value lies. While admiring the close readings of Lucas and the Leavises, we must admit that Dickens does not write for such readers. He writes for busy people, and his great achievement is that he holds their attention and stays in their memory in the teeth of their business. Orwell records the images and ideas which Dickens has stamped on his mind, and which all the distractions of an active life have failed to efface. His essay is a testimony to the power and vitality of Dickens's work

6 *The Violent Effigy* (London 1973; 2nd edition 1991).

One of the interesting points in Grahame Smith's book, *Dickens, Money and Society,*[7] is that he implicitly denies Orwell's dichotomy, arguing that Dickens's greatness lies precisely in his ability to harness his poetic inventiveness to a clear, coherent didactic purpose. The institutions portrayed in the mature works, Chancery and the Circumlocution Office, are products of the very creative autonomy that gives us Mrs Gamp, and yet at the same time convey a coherent and global message about the nature of society. Money is the 'controlling principle' at work beneath the anarchic surface of the world that Dickens describes.[8] Smith avoids any simple suggestion that the novels are 'all about' money, or that their message can be reduced to a set of statements about the effects of money, but he writes as though money were the pole around which all the elements of the novels arrange themselves into a coherent pattern. He describes Dickens's vision of English society in these terms –

> ... a series of interlocking systems ... each bent on maintaining its power and privilege: Parliament, the law, the church, the civil service, manufacturers and merchants, financiers, doctors, philanthropists, all pursuing their self-contained and limited aims, but all finally forming into a vast complex of social, political and economic oppression.
>
> (*Dickens, Money and Society* p219)

– and sees the novels as

> ... fictional worlds that constitute a comprehensive critique of nineteenth century life [in which] we find money as the force that unites their disparate elements. The details of plot, character and action which make up the complex structures of Dickens' later novels reflect the web of financial interdependence that holds individuals and classes in modern society in a grasp as isolating as it is inescapable.
>
> (*Dickens, Money and Society* p221)

The trick of reconciling gargoyles and architecture is pulled off by Smith's argument that Dickens's 'creative autonomy' and his insight into the systematic oppressiveness of capitalist society both have their origins in the defining experiences of his early life, the spell in the blacking factory and the blighting of his love affair with Maria Beadnell. Dickens is '*the* significant man and novelist of his time'.[9]

---

7 Berkeley, Ca, 1968

8 *Dickens, Money and Society* p221.

9 *Dickens, Money and Society* p213.

The overall effect of Smith's argument is to give a distorted view of the novels. By promoting money as the 'controlling principle' of the Dickens world, he tends to de-value other themes. Dickens, in his life, in his social thinking and in his novels, was hugely interested in money, but not uniquely interested in it. Two other themes could, with as much or as little justice, be put forward as organizing principles in his work – that of marriage and the home, and that of hypocrisy and humbug. Clearly these overlap with the money theme, but not so as to make them reducible to it. Much of what Dickens says about marriage has to do with the mercenary motives of marriage partners and their families – but not everything. There is certainly an economic aspect to the unhappiness of a home like the Wilfers', but we should be as misguided as Bella if we tried to reduce their problem to one of simple poverty.

And as for humbug, it is precisely in the later novels, which, according to Smith's account, are more tightly organized around the theme of money, that the humbug theme becomes more autonomous. Pecksniff is given a pecuniary motive for his hypocrisy which, if we took it at all seriously, would diminish his stature. A man who pretends to admire a rich relation in the hope of getting money out of him is not very interesting. Pecksniff is gratuitously and totally false, presenting such a completely watertight appearance of virtue as to undermine our belief in goodness, and the fact that he stands to gain by his duplicity seems all but irrelevant. If anything it makes him seem less appalling than he is. In later novels Dickens comes to see that hypocrisy is not simply a species of confidence trick, not just an act put on to swindle us out of our money, but a hateful and destructive state of mind. When we come to Pumblechook, of all his hypocrites the one Dickens seems to hate the most, we find that there is no suggestion that the man has serious financial motives. Bounderby, too, is a disinterested humbug, creating by force of will an entirely false persona for its own sake.

Another version of the 'architecture' view of Dickens's later novels, would emphasise not the thematic unity put forward by the writers I have mentioned so

far, but the novels' imaginative unity. It seems to me to be absolutely clear that we have a sense of these novels as coherent imaginative wholes: character, action, themes, and recurrent objects and events, all serve to create a sense of unity in which every part contributes to an overall effect and a coherent vision. This remains true despite the absence of organizing principles and central images. For example we might say that *Bleak House* is a coherent vision of a society, in which every element in the novel contributes either to the presentation of this vision, or to the evocation of an ideal opposite of such a society. Mrs Pardiggle, Phil Squod, Tulkinghorn and Hortense all belong together in the same novel with Esther, Mr Jarndyce and Allan Woodcourt. This is not unity based on a single dominant theme, but a complex, organic vision which does full justice to the complexity of the society it seeks to represent.

A problem arises, however, when we try to say just what we mean by this imaginative unity, and how it is to be used in an attempt to understand the novels. There is a stronger and a weaker form of the view that the novels are imaginative unities. The strong form uses the imaginative unity as a point of reference by which to explain the role of the elements in the work, and so implies that it is possible to characterise the unity of the novel in some way, since otherwise there would be no explanation. This view of Dickens's novels seems implausible for much the same reason as the doctrine of their thematic unity seems implausible. Indeed, it is hard to say whether it is in terms of thematic unity or of this sort of imaginative unity that a writer like Lucas, who speaks often of the *rhythms* of the novels, would stake his claim for the artistic integrity of Dickens's later novels.

There is a weaker form of the 'imaginative unity' account of the novels – weaker in the sense that it drops the explanatory claim. The same claim of architectural coherence is there, the same claim of organic unity, but without the suggestion that we should explain the meaning of the parts by showing how they contribute to the unified whole. Dickens makes us feel that Mrs Pardiggle, Phil Squod and the rest belong together in the same world, but to understand why this is so we must look

at *them*, and not deduce their connection from a prior sense of the architectural shape of the novel as a whole.

In its strong form, the view of the novels as imaginative unities implies that the unity gives meaning to the parts and to the relations between the parts; the weak form implies that the meaning of the parts and the relations between them are what establish the unity of the whole. I have tried, in this thesis, to follow the weaker form. I see it as the critic's business to explain the meaning of passages in a novel, to point out parallels and contrasts, to provide imaginative stimulus, and generally to nudge the readers into a position from which they can grasp for themselves the unity of the work. The strong form of the idea of imaginative unity suggests that the critic might discover, and hand on to the readers, a principle of unity by reference to which they can understand the work. Apart from being implausible when applied to a Dickens novel, this model misrepresents what readers need to do in order to grasp the imaginative unity of the novel. Readers must think through and respond to the parts in order to win through to an appreciation of the work as a whole. The critic should not pre-empt the readers' work by offering them a unifying key.

One of the things meant by the claim that the novels are architectural, imaginative, organic wholes is that they are more than the sum of their parts. That a 'whole' is more than the sum of its parts is often said, in all sorts of contexts, and it is usually accepted as self-evidently true. Often it is quite trivially true: a word is more than a succession of letters, and a sentence is more than a succession of words. In its application to novels it is highly metaphorical. The clearest application of the saying is the story of the bundle of sticks, in which each stick can be broken individually, but the bundle as a whole cannot be broken. Here there is a clear difference between the whole bundle and the sum of its parts, and we can also see what is meant by 'more'. When we come to a novel each term in the proposition is hard to apply. We'll allow the obscurity of *whole*, since that is the term we are puzzling over; but what are the *parts*, corresponding to the sticks, and

what is the mere *sum* of the parts, corresponding to the total resistance of the sticks if they are broken in succession? And what is meant by saying that the whole is *more* than the sum of the parts? Oddly, it makes better sense to say that *Pickwick Papers* is more than the sum of its parts, than that *Bleak House* is. Because we can just about imagine what it would be like to read and understand the 'parts' of *Pickwick* separately, we can form an idea of what is gained by reading them together, as a whole. The same might be said of a collection of short stories, where we might say that each throws light on the other. But what are the *parts* of *Bleak House*? One might say that the monthly instalments are the parts, or the chapters, or the strands of plot, or the great set-pieces, or the characters. It is almost impossible to imagine how anyone could read and understand these parts separately, nor what can be meant by their sum unless it is precisely the whole, *Bleak House* itself. In other words, the more convinced we are that a novel is a unified whole, more than the sum of its parts, the less easy it is to say what we mean by this.

We might use the metaphor of *landscape* to suggest what we mean by a unified whole, in the weaker and more acceptable sense of the term. We might, for example, describe the 'landscape' of *Dombey & Son* by referring to the recurrent opposition of cold and warmth, the sustaining emblems of the bottle of Madeira and Captain Cuttle's silverware, the wind and rain with their foreknowledge of Dombey's fall, the parallel between Edith and Alice, the contrast between the Dombey house and the Wooden Midshipman, the railway and the sea, Dombey standing stiff and cold before the fire, Florence weeping, Edith flaunting her sexual charms, Carker snarling. It sounds as though we are straining after a quasi-pictorial effect, something that might decorate the title page. Our sense that these elements belong together is stronger than our sense of anything that holds them together. The wholeness or unity of the work comes down to the many relationships between different passages, relationships which, we might say, form a

criss-cross to hold the work together. The unity is strong and effective if the relationships between the elements are illuminating, exciting, moving, beautiful.

Orwell suggests another appropriate metaphor to characterize the unity of the novels when he refers to the *face* that he sees behind them:

> Well, in the case of Dickens I see a face that is not quite the face of Dickens's photographs, though it resembles it. It is the face of a man about forty, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry* – in other words, of a nineteenth century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.
>
> ('Charles Dickens'
> in *Decline of the English Murder & Other Essays* p140)

As with a landscape, we are more aware of the unity of a face than we are of anything in particular that unifies it. Significantly, when Orwell tries to characterize the face of the novels, he does so by describing it not as a face in repose, but in action, in contention. Finally, the appeal of the novels' face lies in the fact that the conflicts in which it is seen to be engaged are our conflicts.

The novels and real life

There is a whiff of the absolute about the idea of unity which tends to discourage us from thinking of the novels in relation to anything outside themselves. Lucas identifies this danger when he denounces the 'comfortable notion of art as a refuge, an enclosed world answering to its own laws and prescriptions'.[10] Arguments about whether things outside a novel are relevant to the understanding of the novel itself tend to be sterile, if for no other reason, because of the vagueness of the terms 'outside' and 'the novel itself'. So far as Dickens is concerned it would seem perverse not to enlist his journalistic writing and his known public positions and activities as aids in understanding the novels, although we need to be careful exactly what uses we make of such 'extraneous' matter.

---

10 *The Melancholy Man* ch6 p204.

The simplest use is to regard the journalism as providing a gloss on the terms used in the novels. So when Podsnap discusses centralization it is helpful to see something of the state of the debate on centralization. Articles in *All the Year Round* referred to in chapter 2 illustrate the complexity of the issues: state provision versus charity, national versus local, professional versus amateur. Without some of this background, we should not know what Podsnap was talking about. In a sense we don't need to know what he is talking about since he is using the word as a bogeyword to frighten the meek man into silence. But although we know that Podsnap is a fool and humbug, it is still worth knowing what sort of a fool and humbug he is, and the question is made more piquant when we consider that he is, in his objection to centralization, coming close to views that were evidently held by Dickens: dislike of large-scale action and distrust of government. One thing that I suggest in my discussion of the articles on the cotton famine and the US Sanitary Commission is that Podsnap is objecting to something that is inevitable and already on its way. He is not only loudmouthed, insular and prejudiced, but also behind the times.

Another small example of how Dickens's publicly expressed opinions can add a gloss to a novel is found in the description of Trabb at Mrs Joe's funeral. The references to an African baby and a black bazaar help to associate Trabb and his gruesome ceremonial with the sort of evangelical Christianity that Dickens frequently objects to. Trabb's ceremony is irrelevant to Joe's real feelings about his poor wife, as the evangelical campaigns are irrelevant to the religious condition of ordinary people. Such an association does not diminish Trabb's impact as a free-standing Dickensian grotesque by reducing him to an instrument for attacking evangelicalism. The gloss merely tells us a little bit more about what sort of grotesque he is. He belongs to the tendency in society to short-change the poor with shoddy goods, shoddy culture and shoddy religion. In both these cases the 'extraneous' matter is invoked to give the modern readers a gloss that would have been common knowledge to the contemporary reader.

The relationship between the novels and the journalism becomes more complicated if we consider less localised examples, such as the pervasive idea of the home. My chapters on *Dombey & Son* and *Bleak House* will pay particular attention to ideas of home and homelessness and they are ideas that occur in all the novels. The discussion of marriage in my final chapter will suggest that Dickens is usually less interested in the courtship that precedes marriage than in the quality of the home that follows it. Orwell claims that Dickens sees the home as a retreat for his heroes and heroines, into which they can retire at the end of the action to enjoy the prizes of affluence, conjugal bliss and idleness. In considering this criticism I show how Dickens extends the idea of home in his writings on charity and social issues. This leads towards the contemporary and modern debates on the domestic sphere and the role of women. These debates belong to the conceptual neighbourhood which readers need to map out for themselves if they are to respond to the novels.

One response to the Orwell criticism is to say that it misunderstands what sort of novels Dickens was writing. The new Bleak House, with its orchard, its little rooms, the river, mill and cricketers, is not a recommendation as to how young doctors and their charitable wives should occupy their lives, but an evocation of an idealised resolution, an emblematic picture which occupies a place in the landscape of the novel that needs to be filled with just such a picture. But when the new Bleak House is offered as the resolution of Esther's homeless condition, a place in which she can escape from self-denial and self-suppression, this is not just a formal matter: Esther's homelessness is rooted in character, events and social situation, whereas the new Bleak House is, if we take Orwell's view, a piece of indulgent wishful thinking. The formal symmetry itself is vitiated if the problem is solid and the solution is hollow. So we must answer Orwell's criticism.

As it happens it is fairly easy to begin to answer it: presumably Esther and her Allan achieve affluence and conjugal bliss in the new Bleak House, but Orwell is wrong if he supposes that they are going to be idle there. Throughout the novel we have been prepared for the idea of the home as the woman's sphere of activity, and

for the idea of extending the sphere outwards from the home. In the novel's own terms the vision of the new Bleak House is a complete satisfaction of Esther's quest for identity, purpose and love. Some readers might be inclined to leave it at that.

For others it is not quite satisfactory to leave the question there. They might feel that the unity and imaginative wholeness of this novel, are greater or less depending on how solidly based the ideas of home and the woman's sphere turn out to be. Imaginative wholeness depends on people being able to imagine it, and there are substantial stumbling-blocks that hinder the imagination of late twentieth-century readers. There is something unsatisfactory about the imbalance between the powerfully evoked problems posed by Esther's early life and the social chaos of Tom-all-alone's, and the lightly sketched resolution. This is made much worse if the solution appears to be nothing more than a piece of sentimental Victorian humbug. My discussion in chapter 2 of the idea of home in connection with charity, and the references to Esther's widening circle of sympathy in chapter 5 are intended to help the reader to see that the solution offered by the new Bleak House is not just Victorian humbug.

If, as its opponents would claim, the ideal of the woman as home-maker helped to justify and perpetuate a set of social arrangements that limited women's experience, frustrated their abilities, trivialised their aspirations and forced them into economic dependence upon men, then these were facts which one might have expected social observers to see and respond to. I shall argue that Dickens is sometimes blind to these facts, or does not always respond adequately to them. My intention throughout the thesis is to show Dickens seriously engaged in social and moral issues, and we cannot see this aspect of his work if we withdraw him from the combat by insisting either that, as a Victorian, he could take no other view, or that, as a visionary artist, he cannot be expected to have a line on such matters.

What is valuable is to show how Dickens's response to these issues develops. The development might well not be always in the direction that we would approve,

but it is possible to see a deepening awareness of the problem surrounding the figure of the home-maker. Florence Dombey's home-making qualifications lie in her capacity for affection, but this remains a largely, though not entirely, unexamined abstraction. Similarly, in Agnes Wickfield Dickens represents the angel of the home as possessing a largely contentless spirituality which he describes in terms of 'love and truth'. Although Florence and Agnes might be explained and justified in terms of the imaginative architecture of their respective books, they remain unsatisfactory characters, partly because their role as domestic angel is generalised and unexamined. This is why Esther is so important: in Esther Dickens explores both Florence's craving for affection and Agnes's spirituality.

This leads us to a final reason for consulting the journalism: the help it gives towards placing the novels in their changing social context. 'Social context' is a slightly alarming phrase, raising the fear that the novel is going to be sucked into real life and forced to take its place alongside Chartist demonstrations, Preston lockouts, blue books and the railways, as though its appearance were just another event in social history. Of course, the production of a novel *is* an event in social history, but this does not mean it is the same sort of event as all others. There are many ways in which writing a novel differs from activities such as opening a shop or writing a report on the sewers. Writing a novel also differs, but in fewer respects, from an activity like writing a magazine article based on a report on the sewers of London. The journalist seeks to entertain and persuade by his choice of language, his arrangement of striking images and his selection of facts. We will judge him severely if his selection of facts seems to distort the truth, or if his choice of words and images tends to trivialise an important topic, or if he fails to maintain a coherent argument. The journalist is exercising his imagination, but doing so under restraint and discipline imposed by the facts with which he claims to be dealing. The novelist does the same – not exactly the same, because he is not under all the same constraints as the journalist. The difference is sometimes described in terms of different 'modes' or 'registers', but it's important not to make it seem too

absolute, as though the journalist had no use for the imagination, and the visionary novelist no use for social observation.

The third motive for considering the journalism and the novels together goes beyond the first and second: they involved using the journalism as a gloss on particular ideas in the novels, or as a way of fitting the ideas in the novels into a conceptual map. The third motive assumes that the novels, like the journalism, have a function (not their only function, of course) in a continuing debate on social matters in which Dickens was involved. If we know that Dickens had a strong interest in administrative reform, and also created a very powerful image of administrative ineptitude, it is perverse to see these two things as unconnected. Dickens knew that the Circumlocution Office would cast its shadow over real life debates on administrative reform, and so I shall discuss in my chapter on *Little Dorrit* the quality of the arguments that he embodies in this powerful image. If we find those arguments to be weak, flawed or dangerous, this will not be the last word on the Circumlocution Office, which will still occupy its place in the imaginative landscape of the novel. But points can be significant without being the last word on anything.

Having considered some ways in which extraneous matter can sensibly be used in discussing the novels, I should now mention what I consider to be misuses of extraneous matter. First there is the mistake of using Dickens's known public opinions as a straightforward explanation of what the novels are about. Dickens had views on how the rich should respond to the glaring inequalities in society; *Dombey & Son* is about a rich man who manifestly fails to treat the poor in this appropriate manner, and who suffers; therefore *Dombey & Son* is seen as a parable illustrating Dickens's views. It is easy enough to find passages in *Dombey & Son* which support such an interpretation, but it is nonetheless a rather poor one. It is also possible to misuse Dickens's public utterances on social policy in a different way. Noticing that in fact *Dombey & Son* is rather feeble when read as a parable, we might either conclude that the novel is a failure (because it fails to do what we

think Dickens meant it to do) or that Dickens is to blame for departing in the novel from views that he espoused in public life. I hope to avoid such traps as these when I make comparisons between Dickens's journalism and his novels, as I do particularly in the discussion of *Dombey & Son* and *Hard Times*. The connection between novel and social context is not always the obvious one, but we should not withdraw the novel from its social context under the banner of terms such as autonomous and visionary.

Plan of the thesis

The thesis can be divided into three parts, corresponding to three periods in Dickens's output. The watershed is *David Copperfield*, after which comes the series of four great works, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*. (I don't say much about *A Tale of Two Cities*.) After *Great Expectations* come the years of silence, broken by *Our Mutual Friend*, which picks up and re-examines themes from earlier works. My three parts follow these divisions. Chapters 1 to 4 set the scene for the subsequent discussions while taking us up to *David Copperfield*; chapters 5 to 8 examine what I have called the four great novels in turn; chapters 9 and 10 are thematic, using the retrospective *Our Mutual Friend* as a focus for a discussion of the themes of respectability and marriage.

What follows is a summary of what I think I am up to in each of my chapters.

The first deals first with the presence of money in our lives, the chink of coins and rustle of notes and the tricks of speech associated with money. Although examples could be taken from later novels (one thinks of Jaggers's tempting twenty guineas) I concentrate on the earlier works, because they illustrate the points I want to make and serve as an introduction to the argument of the thesis. I show how Dickens's sense of this physical presence of money develops in the early works. We see that money tends to acquire a moral or emotional charge, from its role as a motivating force, from its instrumental role as a means of corrupting or of doing good, and from its close connection with intimate moments of our lives. Money is

also an inescapably social topic, both in the large-scale sense of the economic structure of society, and on a smaller scale, where we find money involved in, and colouring, most relationships.

This chapter also raises and rejects the suggestion that Dickens saw money as the root of evil in society. His view of money is too ambivalent to make such a suggestion plausible, and his view of human vice and folly too wide to be restricted to a single pattern. Saying his view of money is ambivalent might be misleading. Dickens is ambivalent, not in the sense of wavering uncertainly between two sides, but in the sense of embracing strongly both sides of the argument. When Barnaby Rudge expresses his simple faith in the power of money, and when Mary Rudge expresses her horror, Dickens is committed and engaged on both sides.

Dickens refers frequently to social issues, including the fundamental issue of gross economic inequality, particularly in setting up his characters' problems, but he seems to do it sporadically, without having a coherent social diagnosis or social remedy. Is he to be blamed for this? If there is a profound discontinuity between the way in which a character's problems are shown to arise and the way in which they are resolved, this is both artistically and humanly unsatisfactory. The quality of the social vision and the plausibility of the social models proposed, which are discussed in the context of the role of benefactors in the early works, will be considered further in relation to the later novels.

Another point raised in the first chapter which will be followed up in later discussions is the way in which Dickens uses money-motives as an explanation of profound evil. Characters such as Pecksniff, Squeers, Quilp and Fagin are rendered less horrifying by this. Hypocrisy and cruelty on the grand scale, and the systematic attempt to corrupt the innocent, seem more manageable if we think of them as motivated by thoughts of gain. But Dickens's powerful evocation of these characters and their motiveless malice undermines his suggestion that they are only in it for the money.

My second chapter deals with charity and social work. Despite his belief in the existence of causeless, incurable evil, Dickens does not conclude that nothing can be done to improve the world we live in. Although the most obvious social evils of the time, disease, crime and ignorance, seem to Dickens to be the consequence of gross economic inequality, he believes that the lot of the poor can be ameliorated without abolishing social distinctions or economic differences. His anger is directed less at those who keep the poor in poverty, than those who cheat the poor and deny them the full value of what little they have.

The chapter starts with Dickens's criticisms of the charitable ladies in *Bleak House*, and ends by looking at the problems encountered by the Boffins in *Our Mutual Friend* as they seek to make good charitable use of their money. We see that charity is not easy. Esther's instinctive response to Mrs Pardiggle is that charity is best carried out on a small scale. The Boffins learn from experience that the charitable benefactor must be selfless, avoiding the temptation to self-advertisement and self-indulgence. The central part of the chapter discusses the approaches to charity and social problems that are evident in some of Dickens's own journalism, and in other articles published in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. I point out certain contradictions and ambiguities in these approaches, not in order to convict Dickens of inconsistency, but to emphasise the irretrievable complexity of the subject. The discussion focuses on three related points: the tendency, which Dickens sometimes resists, to see the poor as objects or as vermin; the idea of the home as a model for charitable action; and the question of centralization and state power.

The strengths and weaknesses of Dickens's ideal of charity are illustrated by the account of the burial of the victims of the Royal Charter shipwreck. The strengths include the immense personal effort made by the minister Roose Hughes, his intense commitment to each individual mourner, and the beneficent influence of the Christian home at the centre of the charitable enterprise. These very strengths point up the inadequacy of this sort of charity as a model for social action. It

requires a personal commitment that is hard to sustain, and it remains indifferent to those wider causes and effects which would have to be considered in a truly social response to the incident. Dickens recognises this point, as is plain in his discussion of Urania Cottage, the home for homeless women. He presents this as a genuine project for social improvement, emphasising that although it is a 'home' it necessarily deviates from the ideal loving homes of the novels. Dickens fails to recognise the scale of state intervention that is needed in social work and social policy, and this failure leaves him open to charges of having 'no answer' of his own to the social ills he describes. Against this can be set his frequent denunciations of do-nothingism in government, and also the more general point that there was then (and indeed is now) no agreement on the appropriate model for a mechanism for the relief of large-scale distress.

This chapter on charity emphasises Dickens's involvement in social work, and shows that he knew about the intractability of social problems and the limitations from some points of view of the social models that appear in certain of his novels. The intention is not to make criticisms of Dickens's social and political ideas but to point out that the social context in which Dickens wrote was a complex one, and one in which there were no easy answers. As a social critic, Dickens is aiming at a moving target. Stated in the abstract, this is a truism; the purpose of this chapter is to show how this truism operates in Dickens's social thought.

The third chapter, on *Dombey & Son*, picks up the idea of the home, a recurrent theme in the novel. It is here that we confront one of the central facts of economic life in Dickens's time, the dependence of women upon men, and this chapter therefore opens a discussion of the ideology of the two spheres: men outside doing battle with the world, women making their lives in the domestic sphere. Because this is not an abstract economic argument it is necessary to consider in some detail how Dickens presents the home: as the stage for bitter family and marital tensions, as an expression of its owner's personality, as a refuge.

The main purpose of this chapter, however, is to raise a point that will be relevant to later chapters: *Dombey & Son* is not the book we might have expected from a novel about a wealthy merchant in the 1840s. There are clear references to economic inequality and its consequences, and one of the ways in which Dombey is tested and found wanting is in his relationships with his economic dependants and social inferiors, but the novel does not address the economic and social issues that are dealt with in *Sybil, Shirley* and *Mary Barton*. Considered as a money-fable or as a dramatization of the economic relationship between masters and employees the novel would be remarkably weak. This is no reflection on *Dombey & Son*, but it means that we are left with the question of what, after all, the novel is about, and what Dickens's attitude is to the money which dominates it. I treat the novel as first of all a psychological account of an unhappy family, the driving cause of their unhappiness being the father's obsessional pride. It happens (and given the nature of society and of Dickens's own position in society this is not mere accident) that Dombey's pride is the pride of wealth, not the pride of race or pride of intellect. Money determines the sort of proud man that Dombey is, but does not impress us as the operative cause. We see little of the mechanics of how money works.

The chapter's title repeats little Paul's question, What is money? The chapter suggests that Mr Dombey has no sensible answer to the question, and perhaps my thesis as a whole suggests that Dickens is in much the same position. Like Dombey, his first answer is always in terms of coins, gold, banknotes, deeds, notes of hand, the physical manifestations of money. Again like Dombey, he would no doubt go on to celebrate the power that money confers, power to do good or evil. There is no answer at the abstract level, to Paul's question; what we have instead is a strong sense of the presence and power of money in the landscapes of all the novels.

The thesis moves on from an account of the powerful physical evocation of money to consider a range of economic ideas. The chapter on *Dombey & Son* begins with one such idea, the home, and returns at the end to another, the benefactor. It

is perhaps not obvious why the home should be regarded as an economic topic. There are a number of separate reasons for doing so. Ruskin (who characteristically makes use of the etymology of *economy* to support his ideas) makes the connection in two directions: first he insists that the fact that women's sphere is the home does not mean they have no economic role; and secondly he uses the housekeeping concept of the store as a central metaphor in his economic theory. Quite simply the home was the place where half the population made their economic contribution to society, as both workers and consumers. For a man the maintenance of the home is the goal of his economic activity, and his failure as an economic agent is signalled by his failure to keep his home going, like Mr Dorrit, or his surrender of the role of provider to another, as Skimpole surrenders it to Mr Jarndyce. It is more obvious why the benefactor belongs in a discussion of money. While the chapter on charity emphasised the practical difficulty of doing good with money, the eccentric Mr Morfin embodies what might be called the psychological obstacles in the way of being a benefactor. The emotional aspect of benefaction becomes clearer in the final chapter when we see that the benefactor who arranges people's lives for them by giving them economic support has much in common with an arranger of marriages such as Mr Peggotty.

In one sense Dombey is, in Humphry House's words quoted earlier, a character 'constructed round an attitude to money'. The first thing we would say about him is that he is rich and thinks much of getting money. But, as I argue in chapter 3, money turns out to be less central than we might have expected. No doubt this is because Dombey is a complex character, indeed one of Dickens's most ambitiously complex studies. Mr Micawber, the subject of my fourth chapter, is notoriously not a complex character study.

The chapter turns on a discussion of the view (advanced by many, including Orwell and G.H. Lewes) that characters such as Micawber are single attitude characters, personified catch-phrases, like brainless frogs with a single programmed reaction. And in Micawber's case we might well want to say that the

single attitude is above all an attitude to money: the irresponsible attitude that it will turn up. In my discussion I consider Orwell's view that Dickens damages the effect of Micawber as wonderful gargoyle by involving him, as the novel progresses, in the mechanism of the plot. The issue is complicated by the general loss of power in the later parts of *David Copperfield*, but I argue that Dickens negotiates effectively the hurdle of integrating Micawber into a realistic setting. (The final elevation of Micawber into an Australian magistrate is another matter.) The general point of this chapter lies in its attempt to dismantle the barrier that is sometimes erected between Dickens as visionary writer and Dickens as realistic moral critic. Micawber, unquestionably a product of Dickens's prodigious imagination, nonetheless becomes involved in the detailed working out of the moral drama of the novel.

The function of the first four chapters taken together is to open up the issues for the rest of the thesis. They present us with the picture of a writer strongly engaged with social issues, convinced of the need for and possibility of practical measures to resolve social problems, and yet baffled by their complexity. They remind us that the physical world of Dickens is heavily furnished with money in all its forms, and that to Dickens (and indeed many of his contemporaries) money appeared as both a cause of the problem and part of the cure. Dickens knows exploitation when he sees it, but does not grasp, and perhaps should not be expected to grasp, the extent to which capitalist society is essentially a system of exploitation. It does not follow that he has nothing to say about social and economic relationships at a less abstract level – and these are what will occupy much of the discussion in the chapters dealing with *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*.

These are massive works, and one can only take one way into them at a time. One natural approach would be to demonstrate in detail how images of money, wealth and poverty contribute to the imaginative organization of the books. I have argued earlier in this Introduction that the danger of this approach is that in taking it the critic can assume the responsibility of reading the novels on behalf of his or

her readers. So although I shall try to hint in passing at ways in which money-imagery helps to hold the novels together, this will not be the main thrust of what I have to say. Another approach, that of demonstrating that Dickens's vision of a society dominated by money is what gives thematic unity to the novels, is still more emphatically ruled out by the arguments given earlier. The approach finally adopted is to concentrate on Dickens's treatment of two or three ideas which are strongly represented in the novels and are closely connected with money. To provide further focus, I have tried to use my discussion of these ideas as a way of elucidating important critical issues that have been raised in connection with the novels.

The chapter on *Bleak House* is in two parts, the first taking up the idea of homes and homelessness, and the second dealing with the character of Esther and her role in the book. Since Esther's role is that of housekeeper, the two parts are related.

Bleak House shows us both metaphorical and actual homelessness. I discuss how establishments such as the Smallweeds', Dedlocks' and Jellybys' leave their inhabitants in a metaphorical sense homeless; and also consider the social and economic problems caused and suffered by those living on the streets or in rotting slums. The connection between the actual and metaphorical senses of homelessness is expressed by the recurrent idea of taking an outcast into one's home. As a response to social and economic problems, this combines the two models of social solution discussed earlier, the benefactor and the home. My discussion points up the inadequacy of these models, but this is not a criticism of Dickens's social thinking. What we would criticise him for would be if he suggested, as he does in earlier novels, that such models are adequate, when they are so plainly not.

The section on Esther is, in my view, the most important single section of the thesis, both as an example of the way I have approached criticism and because of its relevance to the artistic and moral balance of the novel. If we appreciate the

strength of Esther's character and intelligence, she becomes a more effective counter-weight to the brilliance of the third-person narrator, and this contributes to the artistic unity of the work. The moral coherence of the work is, I think, severely damaged if we don't understand that Esther is strong and intelligent enough to take a reasoned decision to marry John Jarndyce. If her acquiescence is entirely due to exaggerated gratitude, Jarndyce becomes not merely mistaken, but in this respect actually wicked, which does not seem to be what Dickens intends. What I think of as the vindication of Esther involves first a consideration of the power of her narrative and then an evaluation of her response to Mrs Pardiggle, that a woman's work in the world must develop out of her housekeeping role by a progressive widening of the sphere of domestic sympathy.

One of the weaknesses of the characterization of Agnes in *David Copperfield* is that we don't see her in a variety of roles. We know she is the intimate friend of Annie Strong, for example, but we never find out what they talk about. We know she becomes a schoolteacher, but we don't know what this involves in terms of sacrifice and effort. Given the importance attached by Dickens in the moral world of the novels to the housekeeper as domestic angel, he clearly needs to flesh out the character. 'Flesh out' might be an unfortunate term to use in connection with Esther, whose physical presence is perhaps not very vivid, but certainly her character is given depth by the range of relationships which we see her enter into. My discussion looks at several of these relationships: Charley, Caddy, Lady Dedlock, Woodcourt, John Jarndyce – and finally her conflict with Skimpole, the man who thinks he is indifferent to money, but who will do anything for a five pound note. In a sense, Skimpole is like Micawber, a character built around an attitude to money, but Dickens, in contrasting him with Esther, reveals other aspects of his irresponsibility.

Like *Dombey & Son*, *Hard Times*, the subject of my sixth chapter, is not the novel we might expect from its setting and the times in which it was written. More explicitly than *Dombey* it was written in a specific context of economic conflict, the

Preston lockout of 1854, and we know what Dickens's publicly stated views were on the subject of the lockout. Considered as a dramatization of the views on class conflict expressed in his *Household Words* articles, the novel is very weak, and the protagonists are unsatisfactory representatives of their respective classes. My suggestion is that the novel should not be regarded as a straightforward dramatization of Dickens's current political views, but it is not therefore an entirely apolitical work. It contains a plea for personal forgiveness and reconciliation, but also an unmistakably political (though contentless) plea for leadership. If its account of economic conflict is blurred, with no precise sense of how reconciliation between classes can be achieved, it is clear on the pre-requisite of any reconciliation: there must be a humanisation of industrial life through the cultivation of the imagination.

The chapter tries to cut through some of F.R. Leavis's convoluted argument about the moral status of Sleary by drawing some distinctions that Leavis ignores. I try also to give a sympathetic account of Gradgrind by drawing a distinction between the man and his philosophy, and by discussing his relationship with Sissy Jupe. I suggest that Gradgrind belongs to Dickens's line of troubled benefactors, and that Sissy is an example of the 'wise fool', one of those characters who are the better for allowing themselves to be wrong.

Because *Hard Times* is plainly connected with the nature of contemporary capitalism, I take the opportunity in this chapter to discuss Dickens's economic views, using a comparison with Ruskin to clarify the position. I suggest that Dickens instinctively feels that the world is a world of abundance, but that when he thinks he accepts the conventional economic view of the world as one of scarcity, and with this he falls in with the ideology of capitalism. According to this ideology the best political solution is one in which the workers are reconciled with their masters on the masters' terms. For this reason, I suggest, Dickens does not appreciate the economic dimension of what is wrong with Coketown. His actual answer to the question, that it is the denial of the imagination that turns people

wolfish and is the real sickness of Coketown, is perhaps more interesting and more profound.

The seventh chapter looks at two themes in *Little Dorrit*, prison and humbug, both of which have a strong economic strand. The principal prison in the book is the debtors' prison, where people go when they fail to manage their money, and where any capacity for managing money that they may have had to start with is undermined. The prison image spreads further, and we see reproduced in society at large the main features of prison life, such as irresponsibility and aimlessness. Much of the discussion of prison concentrates on John Carey's brilliant attack on those who use the symbol of prison as a key to what the novel is all about, in the course of which he criticises Dickens for devaluing the effect of the Marshalsea passages by using them to moralise about society as prison. The intention here is less to disagree with Carey (although I do suggest that he makes his point partly by a seriously selective quotation from one of Amy's letters to Arthur) than to make the point that it is possible to accept Carey's general argument about the imaginative quality of Dickens's work, without abandoning the obligation to elucidate and criticise his social thought.

My discussion of humbug suggests that *Little Dorrit* is Dickens's most successful social novel, by which I mean that the political and social context of events is not mere local colour, but is built into the story more thoroughly than elsewhere. The systematic humbug that is Mr Dorrit's survival mechanism, but which also causes his downfall, is seen at work in the Barnacle-Merdle episodes – again both as part of the mechanism by which the system of government proceeds, and as leading to its great disasters. Much of the humbug turns on a refusal to keep clear accounts, a refusal to recognise the truth about money, and a willingness to be fooled by the magic of large numbers and the glitter of diamonds.

It is often said that *Little Dorrit* is a novel in which everything is interrelated, and to some extent my discussion goes along with this view as I trace the line from

the Marshalsea to Bleeding Heart Yard, Merdle, Barnacles, Gowan, Meagles, with the love affair of Arthur and Amy working through them all. But there is a curious lack of connection in the plot, where the central event, Dorrit's incarceration, is no more than peripherally connected with either Mrs Clennam's crime or the Circumlocution Office. The loss and recovery of Dorrit's fortune are arbitrary, external events, which is worth pointing out, not because it spoils the novel, but rather because it doesn't. If tight organization and thematic unity were as important in *Little Dorrit* as is sometimes claimed, this looseness in the plot might appear as a serious defect. There is so much in the detail of the imagery and incidents which holds the novel together that this thematic looseness hardly shows, or else it comes as a relief, assuring us that things are not too tidily parcelled up.

The visionary world of *Little Dorrit* is so powerful and complete that it might seem unnecessary to consider passages in the novel as contribution to the debate on administrative reform. But the Circumlocution Office became so inevitably part of the common currency of the debate, that it is appropriate to ask about the quality of Dickens's thought on this issue. I consider Leavis's view that the novel is, in effect, a repudiation of the 'social' in favour of the personal and individual. Leavis makes much of Dickens's evident capacity to identify the philistinism of Mr Meagles, and to put distance between himself and Meagles's well-meaning but flawed engagement with the social world. My suggestion is that for all his ability to 'place' Meagles, Dickens's own political thought has in it something of the Meagles philistinism which, although we might sense the danger inherent in it, adds to the vital, unvarnished quality of the novel.

The chapter on *Great Expectations*, the last chapter in the middle section of the thesis, takes its start from a phrase of Pip's, 'manhood and independence'. Pip's restlessness and discontent make him reject the forge as the route to manhood and independence and choose instead the project of becoming a gentleman. The coupling of manhood with independence illustrates the difficulty of isolating economic themes from others. Independence has clearly an economic aspect. It is

related to respectability, another term in which the moral, social and economic implications mingle. Manhood is offered as an alternative ideal to that of the gentleman: Joe is referred to as a Man with a capital M, and Dickens famously avoids calling him a *gentleman* by the intriguing device of introducing *Christian* between the two elements of the word. Rejecting the road through the forge to manhood and independence, Pip chooses to become a gentleman, which means becoming dependent on the product of someone else's labour, as the brewer is dependent on the ungentlemanly work of the innkeeper.

There are no pious people in *Great Expectations* but Pip grows up in an unmistakable atmosphere of debased Calvinism which leaves him with a sense of his own wickedness. The sad detachment detectable in the narrative tone suggests a man who is becoming reconciled to his past, but the reconciliation has not led to disengagement and we don't feel that he is an entirely objective observer. We are always entitled to ask how reliable his moral judgement is, whether in his vehement denunciation of Pumblechook or in his bitter self-recrimination. Becoming a gentleman is not the cure for life's ills that the child Pip imagines it to be, but neither is it just a piece of snobbish ingratitude, as it might seem if we took the narrator's word for it. There is much to be said in favour of Pip's aspirations, his typically Dickensian longing for *more*, although the question remains whether he would not have been better following the road to self-improvement taken by Biddy as she comes up at heel by her own efforts. In the end his search for salvation comes down to eleven years of lowly exile and paying off his debts. Having done that he is justly admitted to equality with Herbert Pocket, and is able to pass without difficulty from the company of Joe and Biddy into the company of Estella.

Great Expectations has the feel of a profoundly moral book, which is not the same as saying that it has a profound moral. The content of Pip's eventual self-knowledge, his sense of the need for gratitude and of the impermanence of life, is hardly more than the lesson preached by Pumblechook during Christmas dinner.

The interest all lies in seeing how events, Joe's example, and Magwitch's, and his own intelligence and generosity teach him the simple truths that he could not learn from the parable of Pork.

In the money-aspect of the resolution there is the same disproportion between the banality of the truisms that Pip learns (pay your debts, rely on your own work and don't live beyond your means and your sphere) compared with the explosive power of money as a force in the story. When Jaggers counts out twenty guineas on the table, he knows they have a power beyond their practical value. The convict's pound notes have been passed casually around all the cattle markets in the county. They are intimate, harmless, everyday objects, but they alarm Joe and Mrs Joe, and, sealed up in a piece of paper in the state parlour, they terrorise Pip's dreams. As always we have a sense of money as an everyday, domestic presence, and as something out of control and terrifying. The book leaves us with a sense of the moral ambivalence of money. Whether Pip should have taken the money is a question we can't help asking, and yet there is no answer to it. Pip and Estella are both better when they have forfeited their fortunes, but we cannot help feeling that they are also better for having had the use of the money. Without it Pip might have grown up like Trabb's boy or Mr Wopsle, and Estella would have been a lost child facing the life of vice and misery which Dickens believed was the lot of those born so far beyond the range of respectable society.

The middle chapters in the thesis trace the money-threads through the four great novels of Dickens's maturity, and suggest how they combine with and relate to other threads. If asked to make a list of what these novels are about, we would in every case include money, and place it high on the list. Economic landmarks are important in forming our sense of the landscape of each of the novels. Repeatedly we see characters built around an attitude to money, and we are unable for long to forget Dickens's serious concern with poverty and its consequences, but every now and then there are cases where, unexpectedly, the economic is less fully explored than we might have expected. In *Bleak House* there is the unexplored gap between

the visionary future of the new Bleak House and the present of Tom-all-alone's. In *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit* there is a failure to address the issues involved in the relationship between capitalist and worker. Although much is made in *Great Expectations* of the moral significance of Pip's eleven years as a merchant's clerk, there is no sense of what a merchant and his clerk actually do. Such gaps and failures are not serious blemishes, but they are worth pointing out, in view of the suggestion that the novels are systematic social criticisms organized thematically around money, and also because the omissions coincide with some of the lacunae that are found in Dickens's social journalism.

All four works discussed in my middle section testify to the power exerted by money as it ebbs and flows. More emphatically this is true of *Our Mutual Friend*. If it ever made sense to say in a single word what a novel was about, it would be true that *Our Mutual Friend* is about money. It also provides a look back over earlier works, in which Dickens revisits such characters as the benefactor, the repressed hero, the housekeeper, the homeless, the nihilist member of the underclass, the young man on the make, the aimless young gentleman of limited means, the swindler and the humbug. There is no great discontinuity between the treatment of these figures in *Our Mutual Friend* and that in earlier works, but there is, perhaps, a detectable hardening, a growing impatience in Dickens's attitude to the poor.

My final two chapters deal with two themes from *Our Mutual Friend*, respectability and marriage, looking back also to their treatment in earlier works. Chapter nine looks at respectability. This is a term, like *gentleman*, in great demand in periods of social mobility. The systematic ambiguity of these terms leaves them open to fraudulent abuse. The status of respectable man can be attained through the acquisition of money, manners and accoutrements, and once attained can be used to stake a claim to moral characteristics such as honesty, solidity and reliability. With his particular distaste for hypocrisy, Dickens is inevitably hostile to respectability, and we also find it generally under attack from many authors in the sixties. The attack on gentlemanliness is less widespread, perhaps because it is

a concept with even more ambiguities than *respectability*, and because it embodies an ideal with a longer and more attractive pedigree.

The chapter begins by considering two of Dickens's respectable men, Littimer and Vholes, each of whom casts the shadow of his respectability over a pair of lovers. In Littimer's case, the villainy and the respectability are separable. His respectability is, in a sense, a mere mask, and when respectable society sees behind it (when he steals money from an employer) he is put in prison – although the suggestion at the end of the book is that the spell of respectability will continue to work for him on his release. Vholes's respectability is much more closely connected with his particular villainy, and it renders him safe from punishment. He and his respectability form part of the system of oppression represented by Chancery. Unlike Littimer, Vholes is not disowned by respectable society.

Littimer and Vholes are rogues, but a third respectable man, Podsnap, is not. Rather, he is the dupe of rogues like Veneering and Lammle. The scenes at the Veneering dinner table reveal the mechanism of respectability as we see the various frauds validating each other, and all validated by Podsnap. The chapter goes on to look at a number of articles on City fraud from *All the Year Round*, most of them by M.R.L. Meason. There are parallels between Meason's articles and the Veneering passages in *Our Mutual Friend*, and Meason provides some of the practical details which Dickens omits.

The characters in Meason's sketches are in it for the money, and plainly greed provides a common motive for those who strive for respectability. It is, however, plainly not Podsnap's only motive, and this develops a point that I make in connection with several of Dickens's hypocrites in the course of the thesis. Whereas in earlier works Dickens furnishes his hypocrites with a money-motive, so that their hypocrisy is seen as cover for something else, when he comes to Pumblechook and Podsnap he presents hypocrisy as obnoxious in itself, irrespective of any

ulterior use it may be put to. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of why the drive for respectability was so strong.

My final chapter is on marriage, and again it discusses the subject with reference both to *Our Mutual Friend* and earlier works. The title ('Mercenary and other marriages') indicates that as in other chapters I treat the money issue in relation with other aspects of the marriage question. Indeed this chapter is a microcosm of the thesis as a whole, and as elsewhere I am interested in what Dickens doesn't say. If his vision of society were as crucially based on money as is sometimes alleged, he would be bound to attack the mercenary motive in marriage much more fiercely than he actually does. Not that he is in favour of it, any more than Trollope and Thackeray are in favour of it, but it is far from being the main cause of bad marriages.

I consider the traditional literary forms of mercenary marriage: first the predatory male in search of a rich wife, and then the marriage market in which women sell themselves either for their family's sake or their own. Dickens shows little serious interest in the predatory male, and I suggest that this may be because he considers that if a girl allows herself to fall for a man who doesn't truly love her, she is not just unlucky, but actually somehow defective, so that it's not something he can allow to happen to one of his pure heroines. It happened to Betsey Trotwood and Miss Havisham, and they expiate their failure for the rest of their lives.

Dickens has a number of strong women who either drive themselves or allow themselves to be driven into the dynastic marriage market. Fanny Dorrit claims to be doing it for revenge on her future mother-in-law; Louisa Gradgrind and Edith Grainger profess a sort of weary fatalism, as though they are seeing themselves from the outside, not in command of what they do. If we rule out, as Estella does, affection and sentiment, what else is left to explain her marriage to Drummle apart from a rather perfunctorily described economic motive? All these examples

suggest that Dickens is straining hard to understand women's sexual preferences. The chapter also considers a number of unhappy marriages, usually presided over by raging, discontented wives. How do these marriages come about? I suggest that what these marriages and mercenary marriages have in common is that the parties marry for inadequate reasons, and marry strangers.

It is not only for the sake of money that parents force young people to marry. Dickens is interested in the emotional manipulation that goes into these non-mercenary arranged marriages, Emily and Ham, Ada and Rick, Mr and Mrs Clennam. Annie marries Dr Strong out of gratitude which either truly, or in her imagination, becomes love, although from her mother's point of view it is a dynastic marriage. What Annie says about her early flirtation with Jack, and her subsequent disciplining of her heart is misapplied by David to his own unwise marriage to Dora. In all these cases, and even in John Jarndyce's giving Esther to Allan, we sense Dickens's belief that emotions need to be managed, even stage-managed.

The proposed marriage of John Harmon to Bella is the most grotesque piece of management. What was Old Harmon really getting at when he decreed that his son should marry Bella? This is part of a larger question about the conclusion of John and Bella's story. We are left with Mrs Boffin's evocation of the Harmon gold gleaming in the sunlight, a naively hopeful idea of wealth which is astonishing in view of the deeply negative view of money that has been taken throughout the rest of the book. Is it just another case of Dickens carelessly rewarding his characters on parting from them, like Micawber's Australian magistracy? Throughout Dickens's work we find him occupied with the question of how to be a good person, a question often expressed in terms of money, how to have the right attitude towards money, its dangers and its powers for good and evil. The grotesquely arbitrary pairing of Bella and John turns out happily because they harmonise two contrary attitudes to money and to life. John is put down and self-denying, while Bella will not be put down. Dickens admires self-denial, but he admires and rewards also

those heroes and heroines who, in the face of deprivation, assert themselves and ask for more.

Good and bad money

Inevitably much of the thesis is about morality, and we shall have to consider good and bad people. But although Dickens is a moralist, and as writers such as Lucas, Smith and Hobsbaum would insist, a deeply serious moralist, he is also an entertainer and fantasist, with a streak of irresponsibility and opportunism. He praises his good people, and punishes his bad people some of the time, but he lavishes the most creative energy on people who are neither very good nor bad: Dick Swiveller, Mr Toots, the Micawbers, the Jellybys, Sleary, Pancks and Flora Finching, Wemmick, Mrs Wilfer.

My conclusion about Dickens's attitude to money, and his treatment of it, is that as a serious moralist he cannot be expected to have a simple view, and as an opportunist and entertainer he is unlikely to offer a consistent view. Harsh things will be said about money and its connection with the abuses that he attacks. But Dickens likes money. He likes it because of the good that people can do with it, both for themselves and for others. He also likes it because it would be absurd to hate something that is so important in the lives of ordinary people.

> Sir, I am not aware that the man was ever yet born without more than the average amount of water on the brain, as would *not* find twenty pound acceptable.
> (*Somebody's Luggage* 'His Wonderful End' p278)

Dickens takes pleasure in the chink of small coins, and above all revels in the way we talk about money:

> Four veals and hams is three, and four potatoes is three and four, and one summer cabbage is three and six, and three marrows is four and six, and six breads is five, and three Cheshires is five and three, and four half-pints and half-and-half is six and three, and four small rums is eight and three, and three Pollys is eight and six. Eight and six in half a sovereign, Polly, and eighteenpence out!
> (*BH* ch20 p337)

Bart Smallweed is a deeply sinister figure, and Dickens's analysis of the Smallweed upbringing and its effect on character belongs at the very core of his social and moral thought. But this does not prevent him finding huge enjoyment in Bart's

exhibitionism, and he is willing to put at risk his moral lesson for the sake of a piece of fun. In the end, the moral lesson is not impaired, but enhanced, because Bart emerges as a fuller, more recognisable and more credible character.

Dickens's ambivalence is well illustrated by the market in orphans:

> ... it was found impossible to complete the philanthropic transaction without buying the orphan. For the instant it became known that anybody wanted the orphan, up started some affectionate relative of the orphan who put a price upon the orphan's head. The suddenness of an orphan's rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange. He would be at five thousand percent discount out at nurse making a mud pie at nine in the morning, and (being inquired for) would go up to five thousand per cent premium before noon. The market was 'rigged' in various artful ways. Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them. Genuine orphan-stock was surreptitiously withdrawn from the market. It being announced, by emissaries posted for the purpose, that Mr and Mrs Milvey were coming down the court, orphan scrip would instantly be concealed, and production refused, save on a condition usually stated by the brokers as 'a gallon of beer'. Likewise, fluctuations of a wild and South-Sea nature were occasioned, by orphan-holders keeping back, and then rushing into the market a dozen together. But the uniform principle at the root of all these various operations was bargain and sale; and that principle could not be recognised by Mr and Mrs Milvey.
>
> (*Our Mutual Friend* I 15 p244)

The attitude towards money that is evident in a passage such as this is not the ambivalence of someone like Jarvis Lorry the banker, smoothly conscious of the good and bad potential of money. It is, first of all, a funny passage, in which Dickens revels in his own virtuosity. There is also great bitterness against the perversion of innocence, the intrusion of bargain and sale into the heart of the charitable impulse, and the willingness of the poor to see themselves and their children as commodities. At the same time Dickens seems to understand and appreciate the ingenuity of the poor in their response to their condition, so that we almost feel that the laugh is on the Milveys for their scruples.

Chapter 1: The Presence of Money

The physical presence of money

In *Martin Chuzzlewit* money is everywhere. The important transactions of life, such as the dismissals of Tom and Ruth from their jobs, are accompanied by their little piles of coins. We cannot forget the cost of even the simplest things, a coach-ride, a meal, a bowl of punch, a piece of meat, a visit to the Monument. Bank-notes are sent in mysterious packages or concealed inside baskets of food. Like dirt, money gets into everything. Hardly a page is turned without the clink of coins. Everything has its price, from a lying-in to a laying-out.

> ... an afflicted gentleman, an affectionate gentleman, who knows what it is in the power of money to do, in giving him relief, and in testifying his love and veneration for the departed. It can give him ... four horses to each vehicle; it can give him drivers in cloth cloaks and top-boots; it can give him the plumage of the ostrich, dyed black; it can give him any numbers of walking attendants, dressed in the first style of funeral fashion, and carrying batons tipped with brass; it can give him a handsome tomb; it can give him a place in Westminster Abbey itself, if he choose to invest it in such a purchase. Oh! do not let us say that gold is dross, when it can buy such things as these, Mrs Gamp. ... We should be an honoured calling. We do good by stealth, and blush to have it mentioned in our little bills. How much consolation may I, even I, ... have diffused among my fellow-creatures by means of my four long-tailed prancers, never harnessed under ten pund ten!
>
> (*MC* ch19 p386)

There is satire here against a society unhealthily preoccupied with money, but not deadly satire. It does not prevent Dickens from taking evident pleasure in the undertaker's professional patter.

As Nicholas Nickleby has his sovereign from John Browdie, and David Copperfield his three bright shillings from Peggotty, so Young Martin, as he sets off on his journey, receives parting gifts: Tom's half sovereign, Mary's ring and the anonymous twenty-pound note. (*NN* ch13; *DC* ch5; *MC* cc13 & 14) Such gifts remind us, of course, that someone setting out into the world needs money to survive in the hostile environment, which might encourage the view that in *Martin Chuzzlewit* Dickens emphasises the negative aspects of money so that its omnipresence becomes grounds for criticising society. Out in America Mary's love-token must undergo the sordid conversion into money. But the abiding

impression left by these transactions is that in them money speaks of affection and generosity.

In *Nicholas Nickleby* the clink and gleam of money are less obtrusive. There is no doubt about the corrosive nature of money-getting, the mist that gold conjures up about a man, 'more destructive of all his old senses and lulling to his feelings than the fumes of charcoal' (*NN* ch1 p62), but it is money that appears, for the most part, in the form of deeds, bills, shares and entries in ledgers and memorandum-books. There are large gains and losses, debts that can be cancelled or called in at will, and such purely theoretical sums as the huge value of the Muffin company or Squeers's precise valuation of Smike's odd pair of shoes. (*NN* ch2; ch38 p584) The departure of Kate Nickleby from the Wititterlys is echoed by Tom Pinch's dismissal by Pecksniff and Ruth's dismissal from her position of governess, but whereas Ruth is rudely but accurately paid off, and Tom receives his 'little heap (a very little heap) of gold and silver, and odd pence', Mr Wititterly prefers to leave Kate's 'trifle of salary' owing. (*MC* ch36 p647 & ch31 p568; *NN* ch33 p503)

Money's most ominous physical appearance in *Nicholas Nickleby* is not visible but audible, rattling in Ralph's strong-box. Arriving in Ralph's office full of the idea of 'bright, shining, chinking, tinkling, demd mint sauce', Mr Mantalini is overcome by the mere sound. (*NN* ch34 p508) In a moment when he is not dreaming or play-acting Mantalini comes up with an obvious plain truth about money: Ralph offers the usual money-lender's plea that money is scarce, and Mantalini replies, 'Demd scarce, or I shouldn't want it.' (*NN* ch34 p508) This observation puts him, for all his fine airs, firmly alongside others to whom poverty has taught the obvious truths about money, such as Good Mrs Brown, with her 'money is so good to us ... in everything but not coming in heaps', or Betty Higden and her 'I love children, and Four-pence a week is Four-pence'. (*D&S* ch34 p575; *OMF* I 16 p247) But for the most part he lives in a mist of precise, but non-existent sums, like the sovereign's worth of halfpence with which he threatens to drown himself. (*NN* ch34 p513)

In contrast with the unwholesome unreality of the dealings of Ralph and Mantalini, the moment when actual coins change hands can represent decency and integrity, as when John Browdie, combining generosity with prudence, lends Nicholas a sovereign, or when Nicholas repays it. (*NN* ch13 p225; ch29 p452) When Nicholas bribes the Wititterlys' page to behave honestly, it is not a particularly elevating incident, but it has a positive significance, since it marks Nicholas's return to his proper status as a gentleman. (*NN* ch33 p502) Later in the same chapter we see him, with a little money in his pocket, asserting his independence, bustling his mother away from the house which Ralph found for her, and paying off her servant.

Dickens sometimes takes pleasure in maintaining a sort of double-entry book-keeping. Thus Nicholas's starting salary with the Cheerybles, £120 per annum (*NN* ch35), is the same as the allowance that Mrs Mantalini proposes to give her husband (*NN* ch34); and the shilling given to the Wititterlys' page is balanced by the shilling which Mrs Nickleby loses while moving house (*NN* ch33). What, if anything, is meant by these accidental balances? Perhaps it is mere playfulness, or an example of that liking for the unnecessary detail which Orwell regarded as the 'unmistakable Dickens touch'.[1] Dickens's fondness for gratuitously precise sums of money is combined with a delight in professional mannerisms in the conversation of the bailiff's men, Scaley and Tix:

> 'What's the demd total?' [asked Mr Mantalini.]
>
> 'Fifteen hundred and twenty-seven pound, four and ninepence ha'penny,' replied Mr Scaley, without moving a limb.
>
> 'The halfpenny be demd,' said Mr Mantalini, impatiently.
>
> 'By all means if you vish it,' retorted Mr Scaley; 'and the ninepence too.'
>
> 'It don't matter to us if the fifteen hundred and twenty-seven pound went along with it, that I know on,' observed Mr Tix.
>
> 'Not a button,' said Scaley.
>
> (*NN* ch21 p334)

---

1 'Charles Dickens' p129

This exchange conveys well the sense we have in *Nicholas Nickleby* that money is something to talk about, sign away, enter in ledgers, rattle in strong-boxes, but not something that really matters. And yet it does matter, as Mantalini discovers when Ralph tells him his day is over. It is Ralph's memorandum-book, 'in which Mr Mantalini's name figured conspicuously', that has the last word. (*NN* ch44 p671)

Horror of money

Already it has been impossible to avoid classifying money's physical manifestations in moral terms – the sinister, treacherous money of Ralph Nickleby and the honest, open money of John Browdie; money that liberates, and money that ensnares and deludes. Dickens does not have the lofty detachment of Scaley and Tix.

Mary Rudge is an extreme example. Barnaby's innocent dream of digging up gold ('We'd dress finely ..., wear bright colours and feathers, do no more work' (*BR* ch45 p419)) provokes this passionate response:

> Do you not see ... how red it is? Nothing bears so many stains of blood, as gold. Avoid it. None have such cause to hate its name as we have. Do not so much as think of it, dear love. ... I would rather we were dead and laid down in our graves, than you should ever come to love it.
>
> (*BR* ch45 p420)

It might be said that what Mary Rudge denounces is the love of gold, not gold itself, but the distinction is illusory. In Dickens, as we shall see repeatedly in the course of this thesis, money seldom comes without its emotional charge. For hardly anyone is money ever just money itself. Perhaps hardened professional gentlemen like Scaley and Tix can treat it with a degree of detachment, but the banker Jarvis Lorry is the only major character for whom money seems to be a neutral fact of life.

Geoffrey Thurley writes of 'Dickens's habitual translation of sexual material into socio-economic terms', and 'a strong connexion in Dickens between sexual and economic security'.[2] This sense is strong in *Dombey & Son*. Dombey denounces

---

2 *The Dickens Myth, its Genesis and Structure* (London, 1976) ch6 pp117 & 119.

Edith's disobedience over money, her extravagance, when presumably what he really objects to is her disobedience in bed. More speculatively, perhaps John Carker's shame and exaggerated fear of corrupting Walter Gay would make more sense if his offence had been not theft but sexual 'deviance'. The most striking example comes in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in the scene where Grandfather Trent steals Nell's money: '[his] breath so near her pillow, that she shrank back into it, lest those wandering hands should light upon her face ...' (*OCS* ch30 p301) Following the theft, Nell experiences her appalling humiliation at the hands of Miss Monflathers, her repudiation by the respectable world: '... you shall certainly experience the treadmill if you dare to come here again.' (*OCS* ch31 p312) In the subsequent days, Nell is overcome by pity for her grandfather:

> What could the child do, with the knowledge she had, but give him every penny that came into her hands, lest he should be tempted to rob their benefactress? If she told the truth (so thought the child) he would be treated as a madman; if she did not supply him with money, he would supply himself; supplying him, she fed the fire that burnt him up, and put him perhaps beyond recovery. Distracted by these thoughts, borne down by the weight of the sorrow which she dared not tell, tortured by a crowd of apprehensions ...
>
> (*OCS* ch32 p314)

Nell takes responsibility for the guilt of her abuser. What matters is less that Dickens may be using the theft of money as a coded description of sexual violation, than that he writes about money in a way that suggests the darkest and deepest horrors of human life.

London and commercial values

There are other less lurid examples of how money acquires its own emotional charge and moral significance. Selfishness is a theme in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and money is at once a cause and an expression of selfishness. If this idea is supposed to be a unifying theme for the novel, it largely fails, because what catches the attention and impresses itself upon us is not the unifying abstraction but the hugely inventive cast of examples. Old Martin, Young Martin, Pecksniff, Jonas, Anthony, Mrs Gamp, and Mrs Todgers are all in their own ways selfish, but our sense of what they have in common is less powerful than our sense of their differences.

Old Martin sees selfishness in his relatives:

> 'I plainly see to what foul uses all this money will be put at last,' he cried, almost writhing in the bed: 'after filling me with cares and miseries all my life, it will perpetuate discord and bad passions when I am dead. So it always is. What lawsuits grow out of the graves of rich men, every day; sowing perjury, hatred and lies among near kindred, where there should be nothing but love! Heaven help us, we have much to answer for! Oh self, self, self! Every man for himself, and no creature for me!'
>
> (*MC* ch3 p95)

Martin's complaint has too much of his habitual self-pity to carry much weight in itself, but *Every man for himself* is developed further in the picture of American life and in the business principles of Jonas Chuzzlewit: 'Do other men, for they would do you.' (*MC* ch11 p241) It is possible to see here the beginnings of a critique of capitalism and competitive individualism. How effective is it? A portrait, however convincing and gruesome, of a greedy man, or even of lots of greedy men, is not in itself a critique of capitalist society, unless it conveys a sense of how greed is built into the structure of society. One likely place to find such a sense of society is in the presentation of London.

The early novels suggest from time to time an opposition between the acquisitive and aggressive life of the town and the pre-commercial values of the country, between Dodson and Fogg in London and Mr Wardle at Dingley Dell. This idea survives counter-examples such as Mr Fips in London and Mr Pecksniff in Wiltshire. Dickens is not unequivocally on the side of the quiet and repose of the country. The blind man, Stagg, tells Barnaby that gold is to be found, not in quiet places, but in crowds, 'where there's noise and rattle'. (*BR* ch46 p428) A passage such as this, from *Nicholas Nickleby* –

> They rattled on through the noisy, bustling, crowded streets of London, now displaying long double rows of brightly-burning lamps, dotted here and there with the chemists' glaring lights, and illuminated besides with the brilliant flood that streamed from the windows of the shops, where sparkling jewellery, silks and velvets of the richest colours, the most inviting delicacies, and most sumptuous articles of luxurious ornament, succeeded each other in rich and glittering profusion. Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on, jostling each other in the crowd and hurrying forward, scarcely seeming to notice the riches that surrounded them on every side; while vehicles of all shapes and makes, mingled up together in one moving mass like running water, lent their ceaseless roar to swell the noise and tumult.

> ... vessels of burnished gold and silver, wrought into every exquisite form of vase, and dish, and goblet; guns, swords, pistols, and patent engines of destruction; screws and irons for the crooked, clothes for the newly born, drugs for the sick, coffins for the dead, and churchyards for the buried – all these jumbled each with the other and flocking side by side, seemed to flit by in motley dance like the fantastic groups of the old Dutch painter, and with the same moral for the unheeding restless crowd.
>
> (*NN* ch32 p488)

– certainly seems to corroborate Stagg's claim. But although this passage has a preponderance of pejorative ideas (such as *poured on and on, jostling each other, pamper the sated appetite,* or *flit by in motley dance ...*), all of which are echoed elsewhere in the book, it leaves with us an equal impression of movement, light and excitement. Moreover, in *Barnaby Rudge* the antithesis of noise and rattle is not the remote and peaceful cottage to which Mary Rudge has retreated when Stagg catches up with her, and which is described so perfunctorily as to make hardly any impression on us, but rather the sleepiness and stupidity of the Maypole Inn.

Nonetheless, in *Nicholas Nickleby* there is an unmistakable feeling that London is an unsavoury place, where Kate is threatened with a 'monotonous existence' amidst 'sickly girls' with 'unhealthy looks and feeble gait'. (*NN* ch17 pp274f)

> ... the timid country girl shrunk through the crowd that hurried up and down the streets, giving way to the press of people, and clinging closely to Ralph as though she feared to lose him in the throng; ... the stern and hard-featured man of business went doggedly on, elbowing the passengers aside ...
>
> (*NN* ch10 p187)

London is Ralph's natural habitat, where he can exchange 'a gruff salutation' with passing acquaintance, and turn 'down a bye thoroughfare, intent on schemes of money-getting'. (*NN* ch10 pp187&193) But before we damn London for being home to the Ralph Nicklebys of the world, we should remember that it is also home to Tim Linkinwater:

> I've never slept out of the back attic one single night. There's the same mignionette box in the middle of the window, and the same four flower-pots, two on each side, that I brought with me when I first came. There an't – I've said it again and again, and I'll maintain it – there an't such a square as this in the world. I *know* there an't ... There's not such a spring in England as the pump under the archway. There's not such a view in England as the view out of my window; I've seen it every morning before I shaved, and I ought to know something about it...
>
> (*NN* ch35 p539)

However morally dangerous London might be, however exposed a person might be to its dangers, as the Cheerybles were when they came to it barefoot, the dangers can be resisted. Tim Linkinwater can live a life devoted to his ledgers without turning into a Gride. Dickens always believes that adverse circumstances can be overcome. As expressed through the character of Tim Linkinwater, this confidence appears somewhat facile. In later works, even if he doesn't form a clearer idea of how it is that some characters rise above their circumstances while others do not, a profounder understanding emerges of the difficulties involved.

It has been suggested, for example by Grahame Smith, that it was his visit to America that convinced Dickens of the implications of the 'cash nexus' and brought him to understand that 'it is built into the very structure of society at a deep level'.[3] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which Dickens uses his American experiences, is full of those who behave as though cash payment were, in Carlyle's phrase 'the sole nexus of man to man'.[4] Tom Pinch accuses his sister's employer of imagining that he has rights over her by virtue of 'the payment of an annual sum of money' and tells him that the money is 'the least part of your bargain in such a case'. (*MC* ch36 p648) The objection is not to money itself but to the exclusion of all other obligations from personal relationships. It is worth noticing another important qualification in what Tom says: *in such a case*. Is it because Ruth is a ladylike young woman that the brass and copper founder has greater obligations towards her?

Martin Chuzzlewit contrasts the selfless with the selfish, the honest with the hypocritical, and the pre-commercial values of Mrs Lupin's Blue Dragon with those of London and America. The temptation is to see these contrasts as equivalent, equating the world of commerce with all that is evil, but things cannot be schematised so neatly. It would be a counsel of despair to locate all positive values in the Blue Dragon, which is either the creation of literary convention and nostalgic idealism, or is, to say the very least, a survival from the past, all but smothered, by

---

3 *Dickens, Money and Society* (Berkeley Ca, 1968) p102.

4 *Chartism* ch6, in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* vol 4 p162.

Dickens's time, under social and economic change. There is more interest, and more hope, in looking round to find, in the midst of the commercial world itself, people prepared to honour the part of their bargain that is not discharged by the exchange of goods for cash. Often such pockets of human spirit will be found among the destitute – the neighbourly kindness of the immigrants in Eden, or the loyalty of Chuffey to his undeserving master (a grotesque parody of Tim Linkinwater). They also exist among characters who are still active on the commercial battlefield, such as the butcher with a 'sentiment for his business' who tells Tom that 'meat must be humoured, not drove'. (*MC* ch39 p674)

The satire upon the commercial gentlemen at Mrs Todgers's lodging house is gentle, but highly suggestive of the sterility of their lives both at work and at play.

> They had all, it may be presumed, a turn for business; being all commercially employed in one way or other; and had, every one in his own way, a decided turn for pleasure to boot. Mr Jinkins was of a fashionable turn; being a regular frequenter of the Parks on Sundays, and knowing a great many carriages by sight. He spoke mysteriously, too, of splendid women, and was suspected of having once committed himself with a Countess. ... Mr Jinkins, it may be added, was much the oldest of the party, being a fish-salesman's book-keeper, aged forty.
>
> (*MC* ch9 p203)

It is easy enough to see through this light irony to the life led by the commercial gentlemen, and to recognise Mark Rutherford's experience:

> Never could there be any duty incumbent upon man much more inhuman and devoid of interest than my own. ... The whole day I did nothing but write, and what I wrote called forth no single faculty of the mind. Nobody who has not tried such an occupation can possibly forecast the strange habits, humours, fancies, and diseases which after a time it breeds. I was shut up in a room half below the ground. In this room were three other men besides myself, two of them between fifty and sixty, and one about three or four-and-twenty. All four of us kept books or copied letters from ten to seven, with an interval of three-quarters of an hour for dinner. In all these men ... there had been developed, partly I suppose by the circumstances of enforced idleness of brain, the most loathsome tendency to obscenity. This was the one subject which was common ground, and upon which they could talk ... My disgust at my companions, however, came to be mixed with pity. I found none of them cruel, and I received many little kindnesses from them. I discovered that their trade was largely answerable for the impurity of thought and speech which so shocked me. Its monotony compelled some countervailing stimulus, and as they had never been educated to care for anything in particular, they found the necessary relief in sensuality.
>
> (William Hale White *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance* ch8 p103)

The difference between Mark Rutherford's fellow clerks and the gentlemen at Todgers's is that Dickens makes each of the gentlemen have his particular 'turn' –

for theatre, music, literature, or whatever it might be. They are not well educated, but it is not true that they don't 'care for anything in particular'. There is something so spirited about the whole description of Todgers's, particularly if we compare it with the more conventional and backward-looking account of the Blue Dragon and its comfortable landlady, that it is hard not to believe that the commercial gentlemen are saved from the spiritual sterility described by Mark Rutherford. Even their passion for gravy seems a sign of grace, a sign of their aspiration for something more than the bare minimum that life gives them.

Not that it appears in such a light to Mrs Todgers:

> 'There is no such passion in human nature, as the passion for gravy among commercial gentlemen. It's nothing to say a joint won't yield – a whole animal wouldn't yield – the amount of gravy they expect each day at dinner ...'
>
> 'Just like Mr Pinch, Merry!' said Charity. 'We have always noticed it in him, you remember?'
>
> 'Yes, my dear,' giggled Merry, 'but we have never given it him, you know.'
>
> 'You, my dears, having to deal with your pa's pupils, who can't help themselves, are able to take your own way,' said Mrs Todgers, 'but in a commercial establishment, where any gentleman may say, any Saturday evening, "Mrs Todgers, this day week we part in consequence of the cheese," it is not so easy to preserve a pleasant understanding.'
>
> (*MC* ch9 pp189f)

What we don't know is whether Mrs Todgers, if she were able to 'take her own way' would be as mean as the Pecksniffs. She is an ambiguous character – she greets the Pecksniff girls with 'affection beaming in one eye, and calculation shining out of the other' – but not necessarily false. (*MC* ch8 p183) She admits that her situation forces her to calculate and pretend, in order to 'keep my connection together', and the arch-humbug Pecksniff denounces her blameless hypocrisies :

> 'Oh, Calf, Calf!' cried Mr Pecksniff mournfully. 'Oh, Baal, Baal! Oh, my friend Mrs Todgers! To barter away that precious jewel, self-esteem, and cringe to any mortal creature – for eighteen shillings a week!'
>
> ... Eighteen shillings a week! Just, most just, thy censure, upright Pecksniff! Had it been for the sake of ribbon, star, or garter; sleeves of lawn, a great man's smile, a seat in parliament, a tap on the shoulder from a courtly sword; a place, a party, or a thriving lie, or eighteen thousand pounds, or even eighteen hundred; – but to worship the golden calf for eighteen shillings a week! Oh, pitiful, pitiful!
>
> (*MC* ch10 p229)

Dickens understands Mrs Todgers, and his grasp of her human and commercial predicament is more important than any judgement he might be making on the commercial world in general. While Pecksniff presents a façade of complete benevolence, and is completely false, Mrs Todgers both seems to be, and really is, a woman of mixed motives. Both her affectionate and her calculating eye are genuine. And in the end, she receives a notable accolade:

> She had a lean lank body, Mrs Todgers, but a well-conditioned soul within. Perhaps the Good Samaritan was lean and lank, and found it hard to live.
>
> (*MC* ch54 p910)

Mrs Todgers and her boarders are at the heart of the commercial world, at once victims of, and upholders and propagators of, the commercial ethos. That their lives are not better than they are is an indictment of the system under which they live, but Dickens is more interested in them and their responses (foolish or not) to their predicament than in framing an indictment of a system. A country architect, an old-fashioned inn and its plump, widowed landlady, a neurotic, rich old man, a London lodging house, a firm of Manchester warehousemen who do no visible business, a fraudulent insurance company, the Monument, a mercenary, drunken nurse – such a jumble of people and places does not amount to a portrait of a society. The material is there for a social novel. We might draw lines of connection between Sarah Gamp's behaviour as a nurse and the irresponsibility of Jobling, the medical collaborator of the Anglo-Bengalee (*MC* ch27); or we might see in Jonas's career an illustration of the decay of merchant ethics and the rise of city fraud, but although such social implications are clear enough to those who are looking for them, Dickens does not encourage us in these directions.

America

Martin's first acquaintance in America, Colonel Diver of the *New York Rowdy Journal*, tells him of the American aristocracy 'of intelligence and virtue. And of their necessary consequence in this republic. Dollars, sir.' (*MC* ch16 p321) In the episodes that follow we see little intelligence or virtue, but hear a lot about dollars:

> ... the conversation of the busy gentlemen ... was rather barren of interest, to say the truth; and the greater part of it may be summed up in one word. Dollars. All their cares, hopes, joys, affections, virtues, and associations seemed to be melted down into dollars. Whatever the chance contributions that fell into the slow cauldron of their talk, they made the gruel thick and slab with dollars. Men were weighed by their dollars, measures were gauged by their dollars; life was autioneered, appraised, put up, and knocked down for its dollars. The next respectable thing to dollars was any venture having their attainment for its end. The more of that worthless ballast, honour and fair-dealing, which any man cast overboard from the ship of his Good Name and Good Intent, the more ample stowage-room he had for dollars. Make commerce one huge lie and mighty theft. Deface the banner of the nation for an idle rag; pollute it star by star; and cut out stripe by stripe as from the arm of a degraded soldier. Do anything for dollars! What is a flag to *them*!
>
> (*MC* ch16 pp336f)

The suggestion here is not so much that there should be more to life than commerce, but that there should be more to commerce than acquisitiveness. By thinking only of gain, the Americans have degraded commerce, turned it into a huge lie and a mighty theft – and the implication is that it need not be like that. Does this mean that provided a man deals fairly, he can be as acquisitive as he likes? We get no suggestion of what this fair-dealing commerce would be like, or what sort of unfair dealing businessmen should give up. We can envisage the extreme cases (murdering one's business partners, for instance) but what about the marginal, difficult cases, such as the respectable Vholes in *Bleak House*?

Dickens goes on to criticise the 'business' of the Americans – a twofold attack, first questioning whether they are really busy, and then objecting to the fact that they neglect other, more important things for the sake of this so-called business.

> 'We are a busy people, sir,' said one of the captains ... 'and have no time for reading mere notions. We don't mind 'em if they come to us in newspapers along with almighty strong stuff of another sort, but darn your books.'
>
> ... Most of the company ... lounged out, one by one, to the bar-room in the next block. Thence they probably went to their stores and counting-houses; thence to the bar-room again, to talk once more of dollars, and enlarge their minds with the perusal and discussion of screamers; and thence each man to snore in the bosom of his own family.
>
> ... [Martin] fell a-musing again on dollars, demagogues and bar-rooms; debating within himself whether busy people of this class were really as busy as they claimed to be, or only had an inaptitude for social and domestic pleasure.
>
> (*MC* ch16 pp337f)

Dickens seems for a moment to be making an interesting distinction between good and bad commerce, but he now falls back on the easier claim that too much commercial activity (honest or dishonest) is a disabling thing.

The central incident in Martin's American travels is when he is tricked by Zephaniah Scadder into buying a share in the Eden settlement. Scadder, like Squeers, has only one good eye:

> Two grey eyes lurked deep within this agent's head, but one of them had no sight in it, and stood stock still. With that side of his face he seemed to listen to what the other side was doing. Thus each profile had a distinct expression; and when the movable side was most in action, the rigid one was in its coldest state of watchfulness.
>
> (*MC* ch21 p418)

It is tempting to think of the American scenes as a sort of warning, to see in them the logical conclusion of the commercial trends described in the rest of the novel, a louder echo of the money-chinking scenes back home, but it is hard to know what to make of parallels when we find them. We don't need American analogies to help us appreciate the fraudulent nature of Montague Tigg's activities or the sordidness of Anthony and Jonas. An obvious reflection of Scadder's two profiles is to be seen in Mrs Todgers's two eyes, one affectionate, the other calculating. But Dickens is hardly alleging, as Pecksniff might, that there is an affinity between Mrs Todgers's commercial calculations and Scadder's monstrous deceit. If anything, the two are contrasted: both Mrs Todgers's eyes are good – she develops both sides, Scadder only one. The significant connection between these two characters lies at a higher level of generality, in Dickens's abiding interest in disjointed personalities.

There is tremendous gusto in the description of Scadder –

> ... every time he spoke something was seen to twitch and jerk up in his throat like the little hammers in a harpsichord when the notes are struck. Perhaps it was the Truth feebly endeavouring to leap to his lips. If so, it never reached them.
>
> (*MC* ch21 p418)

– and we come to feel that as with figures like Fagin and Quilp the ostensible motive for his crimes, money, is no more than the necessary occasion, the excuse for doing wrong. But Scadder comes closer to being a representative figure than either Fagin or Quilp because we see more of the conditions and ideology that

allow him to thrive. His gross fraud is made possible by the falsehood that Dickens claims to be endemic in America, ranging from wordy patriotic nonsense –

> 'We are an elastic country,' said the Rowdy Journal.
>
> 'We are a young lion,' said Mr Jefferson Brick.
>
> 'We have revivifying and vigorous principles within ourselves,' observed the major. 'Shall we drink a bitter afore dinner, colonel?'
>
> (*MC* ch16 p332)

– to the great fundamental flaw in the new republic, slavery –

> ... Oh noble patriot, with many followers! – who dreamed of Freedom in a slave's embrace, and waking sold her offspring and his own in public markets.
>
> (*MC* ch21 p406)

– or, more generally, racial hatred, which is not confined to those who support the institution of slavery: young Mr Norris the abolitionist, makes a wry face when Martin raises the topic ...

> ... and dusted his fingers as Hamlet might after getting rid of Yorick's skull; just as though he had that moment touched a negro, and some of the black had come off upon his hands.
>
> (*MC* ch17 p351)

A country where military officers are 'as thick as scarecrows in England' and in which 'an immense white edifice, like an ugly hospital' can proclaim itself to be a 'NATIONAL HOTEL' (*MC* ch21 pp407&414) is one in which Scadder can pass off an architect's plan of a city as proof that the city itself exists. Indeed his fraud is even cleverer – he persuades Martin, who hopes to make his fortune as architect of Eden, both that the city exists, and that it still needs to be built. There is in this incident a feature which Dickens frequently insists upon – the eagerness of the respectable to collaborate with the manifestly villainous. General Choke, who was recommended by Mr Bevan (the honest American whom Martin met in New York) as a disinterested adviser, but who has recently acquired an interest in the Eden Land Corporation, leads Martin into Scadder's den, and, during the transaction, sits on a rocking-chair looking out 'like a good Samaritan waiting for a traveller'. (*MC* ch21 p419) The same sort of collusion is seen between Snawley and Squeers ('... as we understand each other ...' (*NN* ch4 p96)), and later between the Barnacles and Mr Merdle, and Podsnap and the Veneerings.

The most potent ingredient in the fraud, however, is Martin's own willingness to be deceived:

> 'Air [my hands] dirty, or air they clean, sir?' said Scadder, holding them out.
>
> In a physical point of view they were decidedly dirty. But it being obvious that Mr Scadder offered them for examination in a figurative sense, as emblems of his moral character, Martin hastened to pronounce them pure as the driven snow.
>
> (*MC* ch21 p420)

Martin is occasionally acute enough to see through their falsehoods, but when it comes to his own affairs he is 'For ever building castles in the air. For ever, in his very selfishness, forgetful of all but his own teeming hopes and sanguine plans.' (*MC* ch21 p416)

Undoubtedly, we see only the bad side of money in the American scenes – except that of course it is good Mr Bevan's timely dollars that eventually rescue Martin and Mark from Eden – and we certainly come closer than in the rest of the novel to a portrait of a society dominated and corrupted by money. However, dollar-worship is only one of the complaints that Dickens has to make against the Americans. They are hyperactive and boastful. Dollars provide much of the matter of their boasts, and are the chief pretext for their hyperactivity, but it is the boastfulness and hyperactivity that make the most vivid impression. Perhaps Dickens wants to use these scenes to show that money is, in Grahame Smith's words, 'built into the very structure of society at a deep level,' but if so he defeats himself by the sheer virtuosity of his physical evocation of the Americans:

> The poultry ... disappeared as rapidly as if every bird had had the use of its wings, and had flown in desperation down a human throat. The oysters, stewed and pickled, leaped from their capacious reservoirs, and slid by scores into the mouths of the assembly. The sharpest pickles vanished, whole cucumbers at once, like sugar-plums, and no man winked his eye. Great heaps of indigestible matter melted away as ice before the sun. It was a solemn and an awful thing to see. Dyspeptic individuals bolted their food in wedges; feeding, not themselves, but broods of nightmares, who were continually standing in livery within them. Spare men, with lank and rigid cheeks, came out unsatisfied from the destruction of heavy dishes, and glared with watchful eyes upon the pastry.
>
> (*MC* ch16 p334)

There is much more than dollar-worship wrong with these people.

It is hard to say just what the overall effect is of the American scenes. Dickens offers, through the mouth of the decent Mr Bevan, an indictment of the social structure:

> ... a state of things which divides society into two classes – whereof one, the great mass, asserts a spurious independence, most miserably dependent for its mean existence on the disregard of humanising conventionalities of manner and social custom, so that the coarser a man is, the more distinctly it shall appeal to his taste; while the other, disgusted with the low standard thus set up and made adaptable to everything, takes refuge among the graces and refinements it can bring to bear on private life, and leaves the public weal to such fortune as may betide it in the press and uproar of a general scramble ...
>
> (*MC* ch17 pp341f)

This analysis is borne out by the scenes at Pawkins's hotel and at the home of the genteel Norrises. At the same time Bevan manages to suggest that there is another America, away from these busy places, and also tries to assimilate the American vices to general human nature – they are 'pretty much the same stuff as other folks' and would not be out of place 'in an English comedy' if only they would 'not set up on false pretences'. (*MC* ch17 pp355f) If this is Dickens back-pedalling it plainly doesn't work. The brilliance of the descriptions of the individual monsters is such that Bevan's quiet generalities can make no headway against them.

Later in the novel, when Tom Pinch comes to London, Dickens satirises the particular genre which Martin's experiences belong to:

> Tom's evil genius did not lead him into the dens of any of those preparers of cannibalic pastry, who are represented in many standard country legends as doing a lively retail business in the Metropolis; nor did it mark him out as the prey of ring-droppers, pea and thimble-riggers, duffers, touters, or any of those bloodless sharpers, who are, perhaps, a little better known to the Police. He fell into conversation with no gentleman who took him into a public-house, where there happened to be another gentleman who swore he had more money than any gentleman, and very soon proved he had more money than one gentleman by taking his away from him; neither did he fall into any other of the numerous man-traps which are set up, without notice, in the public grounds of this city.
>
> (*MC* ch37 p651)

Without mitigating the overwhelmingly unfavourable impression left by the American scenes, this passage cannot fail to recall Martin's experiences and remind us that they belong to a literary tradition, and that Martin's view of America is essentially that of the country mouse alarmed and confused by the noise and rattle of the metropolis.

Good and bad money

There is no suggestion that all those who are successful in commerce are morally suspect. The Cheerybles are better employers than Ralph Nickleby, and they do not run their whole lives, as he does, on strict business principles, but there is no evidence that in their business itself, in their dealings with other businesses, they behave very differently from him, buying cheap and selling dear. How else did they become rich? What makes them better than Ralph is the way they use their money. Money is not, on the whole, tainted by its origins.[5] Dickens's interest is overwhelmingly in the use and effect of money rather than in how it is acquired. Mary Rudge, for all her sense of the blood-taint that rests upon money, accepts a pension for twenty years from the family of her husband's victim, and only refuses it when she finds herself compelled to pass it on to her husband, the murderer. (*BR* ch25 p255)

Old Martin describes his own problem in this way:

> In other hands, I have known money do good: in other hands I have known it triumphed in, and boasted of with reason, as the master-key to all the brazen gates that close upon the paths to worldly honour, fortune and enjoyment. To what man or woman; to what worthy, honest, incorruptible creature; shall I confide such a talisman, either now or when I die?
>
> (*MC* ch3 p91)

This vision of how money might be well used is commonplace, almost sordid. Martin equates a good use of his money with finding a worthy creature on whom to bestow it. What is this worthiness to consist of? What sort of virtue will ensure that the recipient remains uncorrupted? If we take the attack on selfishness seriously, the worthy creature will need to be perfectly, or perhaps only comparatively, unselfish. But the pleasures of money, as they are sketched out in Old Martin's speech, hardly suggest unselfishness. It looks as though Dickens is, once again, searching for a chimæra. In the American scenes, he appears to be looking for a man who pursues profit, buying cheap and selling dear, with

---

5 *Great Expectations* might seem to be an exception, but even there Pip's horror at touching the convict's money develops in the end from a consciousness of its tainted origin into a renunciation of his expectations and a determination to make his own way.

complete honesty; and here he is looking for an unselfish man who will triumph and boast, and be keen to go through the brazen gates to worldly honour.

Perhaps Mark Tapley fits the bill. The Jolly Tapley is undeniably an assertion of self –

> ... Mr Tapley took it upon him to issue divers general directions to the waiters from the hotel, relative to the disposal of the dishes, and so forth; and as they were usually in direct opposition to all precedent, and were always issued in his most facetious form of thought and speech, they occasioned great merriment among those attendants; in which Mr Tapley participated, with an infinite enjoyment of his own humour.
>
> (*MC* ch53 p902)

Only by serving can Mark sustain the illusion of being already the landlord of the Jolly Tapley. He insists on 'having the honour of attending to their comforts' (*MC* ch53 p902) as though this were one of the worldly honours that Old Martin referred to at the beginning. Mark is, perhaps, not a very convincing character. There is more to him than explosive good humour, and we sense that he is a complex and eccentric man, but Dickens has not really grasped the nature of his complexity. He is, however, a clear indication that for Dickens there is a certain eccentricity, even perversity, in goodness.

There is something repellent about Old Martin, with his assumption of this god-like role, '[trying] the metal of all other men, and [finding] it false and hollow' (*MC* ch3 p91), and searching for a 'creature' worthy of his talisman. Dickens offers some gentle criticisms, hinting that there is a shadow of the 'universal self' in his complaints (*MC* ch3 p95), and Old Martin himself diagnoses his own variety of selfishness:

> There is a kind of selfishness ... I have learned it in my own experience of my own breast: which is constantly upon the watch for selfishness in others; and, holding others at a distance by suspicions and distrusts, wonders why they don't approach, and don't confide, and calls that selfishness in them.
>
> (*MC* ch52 p884)

Not even this hard-won piece of self-knowledge makes us warm towards him. He has to play two roles at once. Dickens needs someone who can destroy Pecksniff, distribute the money and bind Sarah Gamp over to behave properly towards her patients in future, but on the other hand Old Martin's characterisation as a highly

neurotic subject, incapable of forming normal relationships, obsessively suspicious and with god-like delusions, should debar him from such a magisterial function. Old Martin's question, how to do good with money, is one that Dickens returns to again and again, in the persons of Mr Morfin, John Jarndyce, Mr Meagles and the Boffins – all of them, one feels, better human beings than Old Martin – better, perhaps, because there is more of the Mark Tapley about them.

Money and hypocrisy

Orwell, in a famous phrase, describes Dickens's writing as 'rotten architecture, but wonderful gargoyles', and much Dickens criticism accepts the implied dichotomy between detail and structure.[6] The Leavises, for example, insist that concentration on the gargoyles, the 'characters', obscures the complex architecture which they so painstakingly expose. For them, the greatness of the works of Dickens's maturity lies in their coherence of argument and unity of theme.

> We wish to make it impossible ... to assert or assume that any character from the novels of Dickens's maturity might have equally appeared in any other of the novels than the one in which it in fact functions as an inseparable part of the whole.
>
> (*Dickens the Novelist* Preface p9)

John Carey would have us damn the architecture as a distraction from the poetry of the gargoyles.[7] For him the search for dominant symbols and organizing themes can only highlight Dickens's weakness for flabby sermonising, while ignoring his strength, which lies in his teeming poetic imagination. It would be a caricature of Carey's book to suggest that he treats the characters, images and general furniture of Dickens entirely out of context, in the way suggested by the Leavises, just as it would be a caricature of their book to apply to it Carey's strictures on

> ... critics who labour to unearth [the novels'] 'meanings', as if great works of art were to be cherished, in the last resort, for whatever moral droppings can be coaxed from them.
>
> (*The Violent Effigy* p10)

And yet neither caricature is altogether unfair. We are dealing with two opposed approaches to Dickens, one asking us to respond imaginatively to the gargoyles,

---

6 'Charles Dickens' p133.

7 *The Violent Effigy* (London 1973; 2nd edition 1991).

and the other claiming that a true appreciation of the work depends an understanding of the architecture.

One of the interesting points in Grahame Smith's book is that he implicitly denies Orwell's dichotomy, arguing that Dickens's greatness lies precisely in his ability to harness his poetic inventiveness to a clear, coherent didactic purpose. The institutions portrayed in the mature works, Chancery and the Circumlocution Office, are products of the very creative autonomy that gives us Mrs Gamp, and yet at the same time convey a coherent and global message about the nature of society. Money is the 'controlling principle' at work beneath the anarchic surface of the world that Dickens describes.[8] Smith avoids any simple suggestion that the novels are 'all about' money, or that their message can be reduced to a set of statements about the effects of money, but he writes as though money were the pole around which all the elements of the novels arrange themselves into a coherent pattern. He describes Dickens's vision of English society in these terms –

> ... a series of interlocking systems ... each bent on maintaining its power and privilege: Parliament, the law, the church, the civil service, manufacturers and merchants, financiers, doctors, philanthropists, all pursuing their self-contained and limited aims, but all finally forming into a vast complex of social, political and economic oppression.
>
> (*Dickens, Money and Society* p219)

– and sees the novels as

> ... fictional worlds that constitute a comprehensive critique of nineteenth century life [in which] we find money as the force that unites their disparate elements. The details of plot, character and action which make up the complex structures of Dickens' later novels reflect the web of financial interdependence that holds individuals and classes in modern society in a grasp as isolating as it is inescapable.
>
> (*Dickens, Money and Society* p221)

The trick of reconciling gargoyles and architecture is pulled off by Smith's argument that both Dickens's 'creative autonomy' and his insight into the systematic oppressiveness of capitalist society have their origins in the defining experiences of his early life, the spell in the blacking factory and the blighting of his

---

8 *Dickens, Money and Society* p221.

love affair with Maria Beadnell. Dickens is '*the* significant man and novelist of his time'.[9]

The overall effect of Smith's argument is to give a distorted view of the novels. By promoting money as the 'controlling principle' of the Dickens world, he tends to de-value other themes. Dickens, in his life, in his social thinking and in his novels, was hugely interested in money, but not uniquely interested in it. Two other themes could, with as much or as little justice, be put forward as organizing principles in his work – that of marriage and the home, and that of hypocrisy and humbug. Clearly these overlap with the money theme, but not so as to make them reducible to it. Much of what Dickens says about marriage has to do with the mercenary motives of marriage partners and their families – but not everything. There is certainly an economic aspect to the unhappiness of a home like the Wilfers', but we should be as misguided as Bella if we tried to reduce their problem to one of simple poverty.

And as for humbug, it is precisely in the later novels, which, according to Smith's account, are more tightly organized around the theme of money, that the humbug theme becomes more autonomous. Pecksniff is given a pecuniary motive for his hypocrisy which, if we took it at all seriously, would diminish his stature. A man who pretends to admire a rich relation in the hope of getting money out of him is not very interesting. Pecksniff is gratuitously and totally false, presenting such a completely watertight appearance of virtue as to undermine our belief in goodness, and the fact that he stands to gain by his duplicity seems all but irrelevant. If anything it makes him seem less appalling than he is. In later novels Dickens comes to see that hypocrisy is not simply a species of confidence trick, not just an act put on to swindle us out of our money, but a hateful and destructive state of mind. When we come to Pumblechook, of all his hypocrites the one Dickens seems to hate the most, we find that there is no suggestion that the man

9 *Dickens, Money and Society* p213.

has serious financial motives. Bounderby, too, is a disinterested humbug, creating by force of will an entirely false persona for its own sake.

Similar points can be made about Squeers and his cruelty. Not that Squeers is indifferent to money. He is never tired of talking about it, and thinks of the boys as so much cash: 'one hundred pound is five boys.' (*NN* ch57 p847) There is an economic motive for the existence of Dotheboys Hall in the need of the respectable Snawleys of the world to dispose of unwanted and inconvenient children for as little as possible, but the stratagems employed by Squeers to keep down costs, such as his ingenious meanness at breakfast at the Saracen's Head (*NN* ch5 p107), are so out of proportion to the money saved that they seem to be acts of cruelty for its own sake. In his single-minded pursuit of Smike Squeers's colossal ferocity makes the economic excuse which Dickens offers for him, in terms of the value of Smike's services and the need to discourage running away, seem lame and irrelevant. (*NN* ch13 p219) When he buys a new cane in anticipation of beating the recaptured Smike, his hands tremble with delight at the thought of it, and we are told that it is 'strong, supple, wax-ended' but not told how much it costs. (*NN* ch13 p219) This is significant in view of Squeers's habit of grumbling over his expenses and crowing over his little money-saving *coups*. When he gets down to the serious business of cruelty, money is no object. Having recaptured Smike he surprises young Wackford by ordering a coach, for the sake of the experience of threshing a boy in a hackney-coach – 'Damn the expense,' he says. 'There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish too.' (*NN* ch38 pp582 & 584)

Reading through a letter from home, Squeers grumbles over his enforced stay in London, but consoles himself:

> There's nothing lost, neither, by one's being here; because the boys' money comes in just the same as if I was at home, and Mrs Squeers she keeps them in order. There'll be some lost time to make up, of course – there'll be an arrear of flogging as'll have to be gone through; still a couple of days makes that all right, and one don't mind a little extra work for one hundred pound.
>
> (*NN* ch57 pp847f)

He has been looking for excuses to build up that two days' arrear of flogging: Sprouter winking, Cobbey sniffing, the 'juniorest Palmer [wishing] he was in Heaven'. (*NN* ch57 p847) The two elements of avarice and cruelty are tangled up together, and, to complicate them still further, he uses the language of money to express his cruelty, but it is always the strand of cruelty that shows up more vividly. We can sense his eye lighting up as he thinks of *the arrear of flogging* – a sudden arresting turn of phrase in the middle of two meandering, drowsy sentences.

Squeers is a hypocrite, but not of the same order as Pecksniff. When he describes Dotheboys Hall as the 'right shop for mercy' or for morals, or when he claims to have conscientiously fulfilled his duties to a dying charge by sending up the best dictionary as a pillow, he can hardly expect to be believed. (*NN* ch38 p584 &ch4 p94&97) His propaganda is not seriously intended to deceive, being addressed to willing collaborators like Snawley and Ralph Nickleby, who know what is going on. He does not, as Pecksniff does, make us doubt the existence of virtue by subverting the language that describes it. We just laugh (and shudder):

> A wisitation, sir, is the lot of mortality. Mortality itself, sir, is a wisitation. The world is chock full of wisitations; and if a boy repines at a wisitation and makes you uncomfortable with his noise, he must have his head punched. That's going according to scripter, that is.
>
> (*NN* ch56 p839)

Dickens contrasts the attitude of Squeers with that of Mrs Squeers, who regards the sufferings of the boys with the casual brutality of a farmer's wife towards her cattle – she wipes her sticky hands in a boy's curly hair, but is prepared, out of indifference, to let Smike sit by the fire. (*NN* ch8 p154 & ch7 p141)

> ... both Mr and Mrs Squeers ... considered that their business and profession was to get as much from every boy as could by possibility be screwed out of him. ... The only difference between them was, that Mrs Squeers waged war against the enemy openly and fearlessly, and that Squeers covered his rascality, even at home, with a spice of his habitual deceit, as if he really had a notion of some day or other being able to take himself in, and persuade his own mind that he was a very good fellow.
>
> (*NN* ch8 pp150f)

There is a speculative note here, *as if he really had a notion*, and the impression we get is that while Dickens can describe Squeers and capture his voice and his turns

of phrase, he lacks the conceptual framework that would enable him to analyse the intriguing psychological processes involved. So he falls back on a fairly commonplace distinction between the shameless wrong-doer and the hypocritical wrong-doer who seeks to deceive the world and himself. What is plain from everything we see and hear of Squeers, but what is not brought out in Dickens's comments, is that there is a second layer of hypocrisy in Squeers, a layer about which he is genuinely self-deceived: the hypocrisy which makes him portray his vicious cruelty as motivated by the comparatively respectable desire for gain.

Dickens has two reasons for placing emphasis upon Squeers's mercenary motives. The first is that he is determined to have Squeers transported, but unfortunately the crimes committed in the Yorkshire school are not the sort that the law takes notice of. Accordingly, Dickens arranges for him to be involved, through avarice, in an irrelevant, but punishable, crime.

Secondly, Dickens hesitates to accept the full implications of the evil that he has identified in Squeers. It is the same with the other villains in *Nicholas Nickleby*. If Mulberry Hawk were just after Lord Frederick's money it would be bad enough, but in fact his need to dominate the young lord is such that he cannot stop until he has destroyed him utterly. And we feel we could almost tolerate Gride's designs on Madeline's money if it were not for his revolting lasciviousness. Dickens's need to find a comprehensible motive for incomprehensible evil is seen in *Oliver Twist*. Fagin is frightening precisely because his evil is so much more vivid and impressive than his ostensible motives. As soon as we consider his motives he comes down from the realm of nightmare and is nothing more than a receiver of stolen goods, a police informer frightened for his neck, and a roguish fellow prepared to do Monks's dirty work for him. The success of Fagin as an embodiment of evil is due largely to the fact that one tends not to think about the plot. What we remember is the attempt to corrupt Oliver, not the story of Monks and the will which apparently explains it. It is the threat to Oliver's innocence, not to his patrimony, that matters. In all these cases Dickens is offering us frightening

glimpses of what is mysterious and bad in human nature, but as though it is too horrible to look at, he covers it up with talk of something bad enough but apparently comprehensible and rational – money and profit. Graham Greene discusses the representation of evil in *Oliver Twist* and refers to Chesterton's observation that in Dickens 'the secrecy is sensational; the secret is tame', and that Dickens himself seems unaware what is going on, allowing himself to be soothed by 'something less terrible than the truth' – by an explanation offering the illusory consolation that the menace of Fagin, Quilp or Squeers might be bought off.[10] For Greene Dickens's more terrible secret is metaphysical in nature, a Manichaean acceptance of the reality of evil. It seems closer to Dickens's way of thinking to see the secret as psychological rather than metaphysical, a frightening glimpse of the boundless potential for evil in the human personality. This capacity for evil also becomes a social matter, not so much in the comforting sense that it might be eradicated by social engineering, but because human evil like human goodness is, for Dickens, primarily a matter of how we live with other people.

10 'The Young Dickens' in *The Lost Childhood* (London, 1951) p54.

Chapter 2: Objects of Charity

Since Fagin and Squeers are not bought off, Dickens leaves it to the law to dispose of them in a way which answers our sense that there is really nothing to be done with men whose propensity for evil is so unfathomable. The other view, that they are after all economic men, suggests a more comforting possibility. The idea that economic motives are at the root of social evil, evokes a corresponding hope that social evil can be removed by spending money. But just as Dickens does not allow us to take seriously his own suggestion that these villains are economic men, so he does not encourage very effectively the expectation that the generous benefactor is an adequate solution to social ills. The evil of Fagin is too deep and too vigorous for Brownlow's purse.

Although Dickens believes that some men are evil by nature, in the sense that nothing can explain, mitigate or eradicate their evil, he is far too sensible to conclude that nothing should be done to remove conditions in which evil flourishes.

Handing out guineas

Orwell characterises Dickens's charitable man as eccentric, kindly, 'handing out guineas', providing a solution to 'everybody's problems' and a 'remedy for everything'.[1] Dickens's treatment of charitable benefactors like the Cheerybles and Mr Boffin is open to two objections: first that the portrayal of these characters is psychologically implausible; and secondly, even if the benefactor scattering money is a plausible figure in the context of the stories, his response to suffering is not an adequate solution to the social problems underlying the individual distress which his charity relieves.

The Cheerybles would be convincing enough characters if only we could assume something which Dickens expressly forbids – that they are humbugs. They

1 'Charles Dickens' p85f.

are pre-Pecksniffian. For those who have known Pecksniff it is simply incredible that anyone could make such a parade of good-nature without being more or less of a hypocrite. This is Brother Charles contributing to a fund for an employee killed at work:

> Put me down for another twenty – or – stop a minute, stop a minute. We mustn't look ostentatious; put me down ten pound, and Tim Linkinwater ten pound.
> (*NN* ch35 p536)

Dickens captures the Pecksniffian tone perfectly, but then expects us to believe that the Cheerybles are sincere through and through. The fact that Brother Charles really does give the twenty pounds is not enough to differentiate him from Pecksniff. It is odd that Dickens can convey so strongly the feeling that the gift is an act of hypocrisy without being aware of it himself. A rich man can be good, and benefactors are not invariably hypocritical, but being a benefactor is not something that comes as easily as it appears to come to the Cheerybles.

In the early novels, Dickens ignores both the psychological and practical impediments to the charitable impulse. Kit Nubbles stands in the street wondering –

> ... if one of these gentlemen knew there was nothing in the cupboard at home, whether he'd stop on purpose, and make believe he wanted to call somewhere, that I might earn a trifle.
> (*OCS* ch 14 p164)

– and Mr Garland appears, 'a fat placid-faced old gentleman', with a pony for Kit to hold. Not having change, Mr Garland gives Kit a shilling for a job that is only worth sixpence, and is amazed and gratified when Kit comes back to 'work out' the other sixpence. (*OCS* ch20) If the placid-faced old gentleman and his eccentric pony are too easy an answer to Kit's problem, so also is Kit too easy an object of Mr Garland's charity. This marriage of convenience between the benevolent rich and the deserving and grateful poor is an idealisation of the charitable relationship which leaves out all the difficulties. In the generally dream-like atmosphere of *The Old Curiosity Shop* this trouble-free gratification of wishes is appropriate, but as a dramatization of the issues involved in the charitable relationship it is not effective. In later works we shall see this idealisation challenged, as Dickens faces the

problem of charity squandered on worthless objects, and allows us to see the more troubled, one might almost say neurotic, side of the charitable impulse.

The greater complexity of the later benefactors is hinted at in the early novels. Brownlow and the Cheerybles have all had their youthful disappointments of the heart, and there is a tinge of sadness about the Garlands, with their long-postponed marriage and their one, reserved, old-fashioned, timid child. In both *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* the charitable agent is not a single figure but a triumvirate. Brownlow is the driving force, but he needs the assistance of the competent Losberne, while the doubts and hesitations which he does not feel himself are expressed by his friend Grimwig. In *Nicholas Nickleby* the division into three softens the Pecksniffian tone of the vast amount of mutual praise indulged in by Cheerybles and Tim Linkinwater. The Garlands are another trio (like the Meagleses) representing different facets of the charitable impulse: good-natured commonsense, motherly warmth, and innocence.

Orwell's second point is that the individual charitable benefactor, however genuine, however realistically portrayed, is an inadequate answer to social problems.

One response is that *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* do not pretend to give answers to social problems. *Oliver Twist* is the story of a gentleman's son whose inheritance and innocence are threatened by agents of evil, a story of cosmic rather than social conflict. Fagin is not a social phenomenon. In contrast with a later varmint like Magwitch, we hear nothing about what drove him to crime – there is even something odd about posing the question. And while Mr Brownlow's original motive for helping Oliver is of a general charitable nature, he later acquires a personal interest in rescuing, not an anonymous street-boy, but a particular boy, the son of his old friend.

There is a strong element of social criticism in these novels: the workhouse, child-farming, law-enforcement, poverty and homelessness, arranged marriages,

Yorkshire schools, money-lending, money-worship and the irresponsible aristocracy. Is this all merely local colour? The social background does not explain Fagin, but it does, perhaps, explain why he thrives. Up until his rescue by Brownlow, Oliver might be any workhouse child and his story has an unmistakable social moral as neglect and cruelty push him towards a life of crime. The Dotheboys Hall episode does not alter Nicholas's predicament, which has been brought about by his father's imprudence in money-matters, but it demonstrates that the world of ruthless money-getting has no place for him. It helps to draw the line of battle between good and evil in the book. In both books the most important and dramatic social content is found at the beginning, as though the hero's problems were defined by the social evils, while the solutions are to be worked out in terms of particular circumstances and personal virtues.

Brownlow solves Oliver's problem and helps dispose of Bumble and Fagin. The Cheerybles bring about a happy ending for the Nickleby family and their friends, and preside over the downfall of Squeers. Orwell might describe this as 'solving everybody's problem', a vague phrase, which could mean solving the problems of *all the people in the book*, or solving the problems of *society*. Plainly the Cheerybles don't solve the problems of everybody in society, but perhaps Dickens expects us to take them as a *model* for the solution of the problems of society. It is a model that can only provide a very generalised answer. That the problems of society might be solved by a hugely benevolent and rich benefactor pouring money into wisely thought out schemes for the moral and physical improvement of the people, is true, but it doesn't address questions about the content of these schemes, nor the awkward question of why this hypothetical benefactor is nowhere to be found. It is questions such as these that we are asking when we look for social solutions.

The closest we get to a social solution is in the lightly sketched picture of the running of the Cheerybles' business. This is a highly paternalistic affair, with the Cheerybles taking personal responsibility for their employees and their employees' dependants. Inadequate though it is, this is undoubtedly a model of sorts on which

to base a social solution to social problems. However it remains ambiguous: how does Dickens propose to generalise this model? Does he want all employers to be like the Cheerybles, or is he looking for a society which is the firm of Cheeryble Brothers on a grand scale?

Charitable ladies

There is an element of misogyny in the satire on Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle in *Bleak House*. They represent, quite apart from their charitable activities, two sorts of women that Dickens disapproves of: the negligent housewife, and the family tyrant. Let Mrs Jellyby do her housework properly before settling down to think about Africa, and let Mrs Pardiggle be no more than a good organizer – what then? Will the points Dickens is making about charity still apply? Would a rational and well-thought out mission justify moderate neglect of domestic duties?

The satire on Mrs Jellyby is gentler than that on Mrs Pardiggle. She is described as a 'pretty, very diminutive, plump woman ... with handsome eyes', which contrasts with the 'formidable' and loud Mrs Pardiggle 'who had the effect of wanting a great deal of room'. (*BH* ch4 p85 & ch8 p151) Misguided about Africa, irresponsible towards her domestic obligations, Mrs Jellyby nonetheless has a largeness of spirit which is absent from her colleague. Her handsome eyes seem to see nothing closer than Africa. Her acolyte, Mr Quale, talks of the Brotherhood of Humanity, and she describes her associates as 'private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species'. (*BH* ch4 pp90 & 86) Everything is on a wide, if not generous, scale.

Dickens relies upon the intrinsic comicality of faraway places with outlandish names to satirise Mrs Jellyby's pet projects, and it is only in the sober account of 'The Niger Expedition' that we see the appalling absurdity of what she is proposing.[2] There Dickens reluctantly endorses the conclusion of Captain Allen, one of the survivors of the expedition, that the black man 'can only be successfully

2 *The Examiner* 19th August 1848; *MP* pp108-124.

approached by a studied reference to the current of his own opinions and customs instead of ours'. (*MP* p124) If we take this comment seriously, Dickens is not arguing against attempts to cut off the slave trade, but only against ignorant attempts. In his criticism of Mrs Jellyby this distinction is not clearly made. Arguably the distinction is less significant than it seems: because Africa is so far away, so far from what we know and from what affects us, our schemes are bound to be ignorant and misdirected.

> The stone that is dropped into the sea of ignorance at Exeter Hall, must make its widening circles, one beyond another, until they reach the negro's country in their natural expansion. ... Gently and imperceptibly the widening circle of enlightenment must stretch and stretch, from man to man, from people to people, until there is a girdle round the earth; but no convulsive effort, or far-off aim, can make the last great circle first, and then come home at leisure to trace out the inner one. ... To your tents, O Israel! but see they are your own tents! Set *them* in order; leave nothing to be done *there;* and outpost will convey your lesson to outpost, until the naked armies of King Obi and King Boy are reached and taught. Let a knowledge of the duty that man owes to man, and to his God, spread thus, by natural degrees and growth of example, to the outer shores of Africa, and it will float in safety up the rivers, never fear!
>
> ('The Niger Expedition': *MP* p123)

This passage uses on a larger scale the idea, important in all Dickens's social thinking, of the charitable impulse radiating out from the good home. Mrs Jellyby should think of her own housekeeping before thinking of her mission; and the country should think of its national housekeeping, clearing up Chancery and Tom-all-alone's, before thinking about Africa.[3]

Mrs Pardiggle keeps her eye closer to home than Mrs Jellyby, although she includes the African expedition and the conversion of the Tockahoopo Indians among her favoured causes. Unlike Mrs Jellyby she is not a woman with a single idea, but is on many committees and subscription lists. Her activities are large-scale not because of the largeness of her vision but because of her machine-like energy. She moves in on the brick-workers and Esther comments 'between us and these people there was an iron barrier'. She declares her intention of wearing them down and boasts of limitless energy. When the brick-worker's baby dies we see the

---

[3] Butt and Tillotson (*Dickens at Work* (London, 1957) p195n) discuss the relationship between the Borrioboola-Gha satire and the slavery question. The existence of slavery meant that what was happening in West Africa was, in a sense, part of England's national housekeeping.

contrast between Mrs Pardiggle's brutal disregard for her victims' feelings and Esther's tact and gentleness. (*BH* ch 8 pp159f)

An important part of Dickens's criticism of Mrs Pardiggle centres on the book that she imposes on the brickmakers. Mr Jarndyce regards it as unreadable by anyone. Esther characteristically responds not so much to the content of the book as to the insensitive manner in which it is produced 'as if it were a constable's staff'. The brickmaker himself says that it's a 'book fit for a babby'. (*BH* ch8 pp158f) Dickens makes similar criticisms elsewhere. In 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre' the Uncommercial Traveller criticises a preacher at a 'cheap theatre' for his lack of understanding of 'the general mind and character of his audience'. (*UT* IV p35)

The question of how to address the uneducated classes on important topics regularly exercises Dickens. His periodicals were intended to provide serious literature, imaginative and factual, in a form that was accessible and attractive to an uncultivated readership: '... to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination ...'[4] *All the Year Round* suggests that the lack of civil unrest during the Lancashire cotton famine is partly due to the spread of popular literature and the education of the working-classes on social and economic issues, so that they do not blame their masters for the troubles.[5] However this readership does not include the brickmaker. The Uncommercial Traveller observes that the 'lowest part' of the Saturday night audience at the Britannia theatre is absent from the Sunday night religious meeting. (*UT* IV p37) The anger of the 'lowest part', which Dickens allows his brickmaker to articulate, is resistant not only to Mrs Pardiggle, but also, one suspects, to the more enlightened efforts of the Dickens school of journalists. It is this submerged anger which, in perverted form, rises to the surface in murderous characters like Orlick and Rogue Riderhood.

---

4 Address in the first number of *Household Words* , 30 March 1850; *MP* p168.

5 'An Act of Mercy' Part 1, *AYR* 20 December 1862 p348.

Solving a social problem (everybody's problem) is different from comforting an individual sufferer. Mrs Pardiggle sees that what is needed is more than individual acts of kindliness, but is entirely wrong about the relationship between individual and social action. She is 'doing charity by wholesale ... dealing in it to a large extent', as though the way to convert her personal acts of charity into a solution to social ills is by remorseless, machine-like repetition. (*BH* ch8 p159) She ignores what Dickens, in 'Refreshments of Travellers', calls 'a lingering personal retail interest in us that asks to be satisfied'. (*UT* VI p60) The 'retail interest' emerges in the morose resentment of the brick-workers and the rebellion of the Pardiggle boys and Caddy Jellyby.

Mr Jellyby advises Caddy, 'Never have a Mission, my dear child.' (*BH* ch30 p477) He is thinking of the grotesques who gather at Caddy's wedding, each with his or her own peculiar mission. The description of the wedding guests is a catalogue of still recognisable types, although Dickens also relies on some easily provoked prejudice: for example, Mr Quale's fiancée Miss Wisk is described as 'a young – at least, an unmarried – lady'. (*BH* ch30 p478) Apart from the wrong-headedness of Mrs Jellyby's telescopic philanthropy, and the inhumanity of Mrs Pardiggle's wholesale charity, the other thing wrong with these missions is that they are exclusively concerned with the mechanics of doing good: letters, subscriptions, lobbying for positions, making speeches. We get no feel for what it would be like to participate sensibly and moderately in charitable activity, as though the only way to escape the absurdity of these people is to eschew good works altogether. By ignoring the possible contribution to public work of ordinary decent people who are neither fanatics nor paragons like Allan Woodcourt, Dickens makes the prospect for social improvement seem even worse than it is.

Charity and social work

One would hardly guess from the description of Mrs Pardiggle and Mrs Jellyby that the person Dickens regarded as 'the noblest spirit we can ever know'[6] was Angela Burdett-Coutts, who devoted her life to schemes of charity and social improvement. Dickens was in constant communication with her over a period of more than twenty-five years, and took a leading part in some of her most important projects. Miss Coutts avoids the errors of the ladies in *Bleak House*, and, being fabulously rich, she spends her own money rather than other people's. But it is surprising that he should offer so one-sided an account of organized charity when he knows that it has another aspect. There is good charity described in *Bleak House* – John Jarndyce's relief of Neckett's children, for example – but this is different in both scale and kind from that carried out by Miss Coutts The words that Esther applies pejoratively to Mrs Pardiggle's voice, 'businesslike and systematic' (*BH* ch8 p156), could certainly be applied in a quite different sense to Miss Coutts's approach to social problems, but are less applicable to Mr Jarndyce's piecemeal and accidental charity.

The East End

When the Uncommercial Traveller, in 'A Small Star in the East' (*UT* XXXII), visits the slum-dwellers of the East End, he is careful to regulate his behaviour. He resolves to give them no money;[7] he knocks, asks permission to enter and to ask questions; he takes off his hat, like Arthur Clennam visiting the Plornishes, and studiously avoids giving the impression of taking note of what he sees. There is no Pardiggle-like intrusion: his knocking eventually becomes a mere tapping. This circumspection emphasises the sense of the Uncommercial Traveller as one entering

---

6 Letter to Mrs Brown, 3 November 1855. Letters to Dr and Mrs Brown are included in Edgar Johnson (ed), *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts 1841-1865* (London, 1955) p310.

7 He does this to 'test the people'. That the poor were always whining for money was no doubt a commonplace of middle-class conversation (see, for example, Mrs Craik, *Sermons out of Church* (London,1881) sermon 4) and Dickens is pleased to report that 'they neither asked for money in any case, nor showed the least trace of surprise or disappointment at my giving none'.

alien territory. Elsewhere the alienness of the poor is demonstrated by the necessity of going amongst them with a police escort, as Snagsby is conducted into Tom-all-alone's by Inspector Bucket (*BH* ch 22) and as Dickens is shown round the Liverpool dock area in 'Poor Mercantile Jack'. (*UT* V) But here the visitor is in no danger: the fear is rather that he will damage those he visits by tactlessness and misunderstanding.

Despite the squalor and the hopelessness and the lack of work, we get a sense of the dignity with which the people suffer. Sometimes the narrative seems too dignified, too resigned, notably in the stoical account given of the lead-mill worker with 'her brain coming out at her ear'. (*UT* XXXII p321) Dickens notes with approval their reluctance to claim relief and their dread of the workhouse. His warmest praise is for the needlewoman who reveals an intelligent grasp of the economics of slop-work, understanding that those who risk their capital will demand their profits, which must be taken from her own pay. (*UT* XXXII p323) There are moments when we feel Dickens is hearing what he wants to hear (for example when he says they are grateful to be talked to about their troubles), but the overall tone is of one trying to avoid both sensationalism and complacency.

There is no complacent optimism for the future. The rising generation, grown-up sons and daughters, are scrabbling around for work like their parents, sleeping in cupboards, huddled together for warmth. He mocks the idea that political action by 'the Public-blessing Party' can ameliorate the condition of these people.[8] Only the suffering of the children proves too much for him and breaks through his carefully assumed armour of detachment. The only remedy he can see is death.

> I saw how young they were, how hungry, how serious and still. I thought of them sick and dying in those lairs. I think of them dead without anguish; but to think of them so suffering and so dying quite unmanned me.
>
> (*UT* XXXII p326)

8 One measure which he declares here to be futile is the equalisation of the poor-rates, but elsewhere he argues strongly in favour of it (for example, in the paper on the Wapping Workhouse (*UT* III)).

To regard death as preferable to living under certain conditions is common enough, and a sentiment that came with greater readiness to the mind of the nineteenth century. In cases of physical suffering the difference might have to do with the existence of anaesthetics, but one thinks also of Ham wishing for Emily's death as preferable to 'ruin and disgrace' (*DC* ch 31 p513). In Dickens's preference for thinking of the children as dead rather than 'so suffering and so dying' there is not quite the same moral content as is to be found in *ruin and disgrace*, but he is thinking of something more than physical suffering: '... in those lairs ...how hungry ... how serious and still.' These words point in different directions. *Lairs* suggests animals; hunger, on the other hand, is human enough; while *serious and still* suggests the spirituality of Paul Dombey or Little Nell. The Uncommercial Traveller is simultaneously alienated from and sympathetic towards the suffering children.

The readiness of the comfortable classes to think of the poor as alien has a number of different strands in it: the view of the poor as irretrievably locked in their poverty without hope of release; the fear of the poor, the fear of violence, the suspicion that they are out to get something off you; and the idea of the poor as a homogeneous mass, without individuality. Dickens is pessimistic enough to subscribe in large part to the first and second of these attitudes, but is usually free from the third, insisting firmly on the individuality of the slum-dwellers. Some are stupid, but others are intelligent; there is a blackness over everything, but a woman's vivacity and dimpled cheek show through and revive memories of an actress of the past. Amidst the apathy induced by suffering he notices the unemployed boilermaker's 'gleam of admiration' for his clever wife. Humour, instead of being a distancing device, can bring a sufferer to life in our minds, as with the bedridden man who 'unrolls his legs' to show his sores and swellings, and then 'appearing to remember that they were not popular with his family', rolls them up again. (*UT* XXXII p325) The slum-dwellers have imaginable lives and preoccupations with some affinity to our own. Without these touches, the visits of the Uncommercial Traveller would be glimpses of *tableaux vivants*, with figures frozen into attitudes of eternal suffering. The writer of two articles on the relief of

the Lancashire cotton famine of 1862 says that descriptions of the 'grotesque element in all human misery' will make 'no one ... feel the less for these suffering people, but rather the more'.[9]

The Children's Hospital

The slum-visits leave us with a sense of helplessness – suddenly the Children's Hospital, the small star of the paper's title, makes things seem almost easy:

> Insufficient food and unwholesome living are the main causes of diseases among these small patients. So nourishment, cleanliness and ventilation are the main remedies.
>
> (*UT* XXXII p329)

It has all the elements of a Dickensian solution: the cheerful and attractive nurses, good-humoured and loving; the quaint makeshifts, the partitions, with the perambulator (or 'hospital carriage') and the dispenser of medicine ingeniously stowed away in odd cupboards; and above all the young couple who share the work and have made the hospital their home – though 'put to shifts for room like passengers aboard ship'. (*UT* XXXII p327) This has almost a holiday feel, recalling the joyful improvisation of Ruth and Tom Pinch, or Florence and Captain Cuttle, but it also contains a reminder that the doctors do not, ultimately, really belong here. The happy, useful, improvised home is also provisional, like the Blackheath dolls' house occupied by John Harmon and Bella on their way to their final home in the aristocratic mansion. The sense of the hospital as a home shared by doctors, nurses and patients does not prevent it from having its social divisions. The doctors with their piano, books and drawings, the patients, and the nurses in 'their comfortable room of their own in which to take their meals' (*UT* XXXII p329), reflect the stratification of the conventional middle-class home with its masters, children and servants.

When the hospital first opened there was a misunderstanding about the basis on which it worked:

> ... the people could not possibly conceive but that somebody paid for the services rendered there; and were disposed to claim them as a right and to find fault if out of

[9] 'An Act of Mercy' (Part 1), *AYR*, 20 December 1862, p345.

> temper. They soon came to understand the case better and have much increased in gratitude.
>
> (*UT* XXXII p328)

Dickens seems to be expressing a preference for individual kindliness and its correlative gratitude as a solution, rather than genuine social and political measures, but the gratitude he is speaking of is more than mere cap-touching. Social advantages derive from the personal relationship implied by the word: the visiting facilities for families of patients; the increasing knowledge that the doctors acquire of the problems of the neighbourhood; the meals given to ex-patients and to those whose condition is not quite bad enough for them to be taken in as patients.

The hospital confirms the Uncommercial Traveller's impression that the poor are slow to ask for help, and will conceal their needs 'unto the very last extremity'. In order to be of use the doctors have to investigate and record social conditions. Dickens does not use the phrase *social conditions* but 'the characters and circumstances of great numbers of their neighbours', which betrays his preference for personal terms. (*UT* XXXII p329)

In one sense the Children's Hospital is an example of personal kindliness as a response to social problems, but the model is different from that implied by the personal kindliness of a Brownlow or Garland, who offer their protégés a personal lifeline and take complete responsibility for them. Mrs Pardiggle offers such personal lifelines wholesale – hence her absurdity. The Children's Hospital takes complete responsibility for no-one – the children go back out either to live or to die. The basis of the model for social action offered by the Hospital is the home, the home extending itself into the neighbourhood, but doing so carefully, with limitations, imposing rules, and working on the basis of local knowledge.

The limits of sympathy

The Uncommercial Traveller, to emphasise the proximity of the squalor of the East End to the world of the comfortable, closes 'A Small Star in the East' with these words:

> I came away from Ratcliffe by the Stepney railway station to the terminus at Fenchurch Street. Anyone who will reverse that route may retrace my steps.
>
> (*UT* XXXII p330)

The close juxtaposition in London of different ways of life (made closer by the railway) has obvious moral implications, but it is also something which Dickens finds intriguing: 'The shortest road to the Celestial Empire is by the Blackwall railway.'[10] Unhappily, he soon takes up his own invitation to return to Ratcliffe, and in the second account, 'On an Amateur Beat' (*UT* XXXV), we see the less attractive side of his social vision.

The paper begins with some routine ruffian-bashing, calling for the application of an 'atom of commonsense' to the problem of policing of the streets. (*UT* XXXV p346) Ragged children fight for money:

> ... I overturned a wretched little creature, who, clutching at the rags of a pair of trousers with one of its claws, and at its ragged hair with the other, pattered with bare feet[11] over the muddy stones. I stopped to raise and succour this poor wretch, and fifty like it, but of both sexes, were about me in a moment, begging, tumbling, fighting, clamouring, yelling, shivering in their nakedness and hunger. The piece of money I had put into the claw of the child I had overturned was clawed out of it, and was again clawed out of that wolfish gripe, and again out of that ... Unexpectedly ... emerged a genuine police constable, before whom the dreadful brood dispersed in various directions, he making feints and darts in this direction and that, and catching nothing.
>
> (*UT* XXXV p346)

There is a tension between sympathy and detachment, but here detachment wins. The description begins with the pejorative *begging*, goes on with the cold and external *tumbling, fighting, clamouring, yelling,* becomes more feeling with *shivering in their nakedness*, which evokes both the children's appearance and their feelings. But this moment of sympathy passes, and the overall impression is of their alienness. Can there really have been fifty, or is it an exaggeration, designed to magnify the threat and to make it harder to see them as individuals? They are just a mob, first of animals, and then, in the end, of fiends – a dreadful brood, dispersing into the air and eluding capture.

---

10 'The Chinese Junk', *The Examiner*, 24 June 1848, *MP* p102

11 The sound of children's bare feet is one of the sounds of Dickens's London that sticks in the mind: '... perpetually making a blunt pattering on the pavement of the Piazza with the rain of their naked feet.' ('Night Walks' *UT* XIII p134)

The encounter leaves traces in the mud which prompts the question whether, if they were petrified and discovered in ten thousand years

> ... our successors on earth could, from these or any marks, by the utmost force of the human intellect ... deduce such an astounding inference as the existence of a polished state of society that bore with the public savagery of neglected children in the streets of its capital city, and was proud of its power by sea and land, and never used its power to seize and save them!
>
> (*UT* XXXV p347)

Seizing and saving here requires the *power* of *society* – presumably implying state action. An example is offered in 'The Short-Timers', which describes the short-time system of education, and where he demands that the State should

> begin its work and duty at the beginning and ... with the strong hand take those children out of the streets, while they are yet children, and wisely train them.
>
> (*UT* XXI p209)

The training offered in the short-time school includes naval and military drill, and is a cheap way of producing pupil teachers, sailors and soldiers. Dickens observes that the sanitary regulations are good, and that the discipline is imposed without corporal punishment.

How much wishful-thinking went into Dickens's admiration of the displays put on for him by the short-time school? And what about that 'strong hand'? Who is to do the seizing and saving, the taking and training? Mr Bumble, Mrs Pardiggle? One thinks of the Charitable Grinders and of Uriah Heep learning at school to be umble. What matters is the quality of the people running the schools, and presumably the 'earnest and humane men' of the Stepney Board of Guardians do not appear to Dickens to be Bumbles and Pardiggles. The Uncommercial Traveller always pronounces confidently on the character of the public servants he encounters, such as the 'bright and nimble ... brisk ...' matron of the Wapping Workhouse. (*UT* III p20) The successful solution of social problems will depend on the characters of these public servants.

> What one set of men can do in this wise, another set of men can do; and this is a noble example to all other Bodies and Unions, and a noble example to the State. Followed and enlarged upon by its enforcement on bad parents, it would clear London streets of the most terrible objects they smite the sight with – myriads of little children ...
>
> (*UT* XXI p219)

Here Dickens is talking about laws and institutions, compulsion and discipline, as well as personal qualities. He thinks all these are necessary, even though elsewhere he betrays deep pessimism about laws and institutions, and is eloquent about the dangers inherent in systems of compulsion and discipline.[12]

There is, throughout 'On an Amateur Beat', a determination to describe things only externally. Perhaps it is a function of the atmospheric conditions, another consequence of that 'unlucky inconsistency in the weather' which, the Uncommercial Traveller notes, makes St Paul's Cross seem 'too high up, perched upon the intervening ball too far away'. (*UT* XXXV p347) When he meets a woman 'who has fallen forward, double, through some affection of the spine', he gives an account of her life and habits. It is all very detached and ironical. In the end she is reduced, like the street urchin, to an *it*, a doubled-up bundle, observed through the eyes of a dog. (*UT* XXXV pp348f)

There is for the Uncommercial Traveller a limit to sympathy and identification with the people of the East End slums. It is as though in 'A Small Star in the East' he overstepped that limit, and in entering the houses of the poor, exposed himself to scenes and situations for which he could conceive no remedy, to hopelessness which the hospital's small star could not relieve. In this second paper he is stepping back, looking again, looking in a harsher light, losing sight of the complexity of the personal, making objects of the people, and transmuting their infinite problems into a mess that can be cleared up with 'an atom of commonsense'.

But the Uncommercial Traveller retains his clear perception of social inequalities.

> A single stride at Houndsditch Church ... West of the stride, a penny loaf or bun shall be compact and self-contained; east of the stride, it shall be of a sprawling and splay-footed character, as seeking to make more of itself for the money.
> (*UT* XXXV pp347f)

---

12 Wondering how far Dickens might have gone in accepting compulsion and discipline as part of the cure for social disease, one thinks of Carlyle's view that slavery was not as bad as idleness. ('The Nigger Question', 1849, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* vol 4 p376)

The poor don't get such good buns as the rich. *Sprawling and splay-footed* hints at the anger Dickens expresses elsewhere at the way the poor are short-changed, badly served by a lazy police force, badly housed by speculative builders, offered dreary entertainments and a dreary religion.[13]

When he reaches the Children's Hospital he continues to observe things in a detached way, from the outside, and much of the description is given through the eyes of a dog. The death of a small child who had caught the Traveller's fancy on the previous visit is summed up comfortably: 'that sweet little child is now at rest for ever.' (*UT* XXXV p349) As he said before, he can bear the deaths of children better than seeing them suffer. It is hard to disagree with this sentiment, but part of this acceptance of death is due to the fact that a happy death solves the problem. There is one less child to leave the hospital, return to his overburdened parents and end up running barefoot in the streets, clawing at sixpences.

From the hospital the Traveller moves on to visit the lead-mill referred to in 'A Small Star in the East'. In the earlier paper we were told of the appalling diseases caused by working in the lead-mills. One worker spoke philosophically of the effects of lead poisoning, and the present paper refers back to what she said: ' ... 'tis all according to the constitooshun sur; and some constitooshuns is strong and some is weak.' (*UT* XXXII pp320f) Such fatalism seems brave and dignified in the mouth of an ignorant woman forced by her circumstances to work in conditions of danger, but is shocking when endorsed by a humane social reformer as a fair summary of 'the philosophy of the matter of lead-poisoning and workpeople'. (*UT* XXXV p352)

The Uncommercial Traveller describes the lead-mill in terms reminiscent of the hospital. The only fault he finds is that there might have been more towels in the washing-room. He uses a series of positively charged words: the processes are

---

13 See for example the attack on the police earlier in this paper; the criticism of popular preaching in 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre' (*UT* IV); the description of the locality of Bradley Headstone's school (*OMF* II 1); and the dismal fair that visits the town where Lizzie finds refuge. (*OMF* IV 6)

'picturesque and interesting', the ventilation is good, the workers brisk, their tea-room homely. There is even, in the comparison of the women's gowns and masks with those of a Turk's harem, a hint of *The Arabian Nights*, a certain sign of Dickens's approval. In the midst of all this the admission that some of the processes 'are unquestionably inimical to health' is passed over quickly and the final judgement is that the owners have 'nothing there to be concealed and nothing to be blamed for'. (*UT* XXXV pp351f)

His approval once again rests on his feel for character, his sense that the managers, 'two very intelligent gentlemen', have 'honestly and sedulously' done their best to minimise the risks, and can do no more until 'American inventiveness' cuts the knot by coming up with a safe mechanical method of production. (*UT* XXXV p352) It is plainly unthinkable that society in the meantime should do without white lead altogether. The suspicion that Dickens has swallowed the bosses' version whole is strengthened by his remark that the workers are 'very capricious and irregular in their attendance', in contradiction to what we are told in the earlier paper, where it appears that the employers take the women on and lay them off from day to day. (*UT* XXXV p352; XXXII p320) Dickens hears the impatient voices of Daniel Doyce and Ironmaster Rouncewell in the explanations given him by these two very intelligent brothers.

Burying the dead

The Uncommercial Traveller visits many charitable concerns, public and private, but of all those labouring to relieve distress none is praised more highly than Rev Stephen Roose Hughes, who buried the victims of the wreck of the Royal Charter. ('The Shipwreck' *UT* II)[14]

Dickens ignores several significant public aspects of the disaster, such as suggestions that commercial pressures led to a gamble with the ship's safety,[15] and

[14] For the background to this event, see Alexander McKee, *The Golden Wreck* (2nd edition London, 1986).

[15] The public enquiry dismissed all such accusations, and is endorsed in this by Alexander McKee. (*The Golden Wreck* pp45 & 171)

hysterical outcries against the local fishermen for plundering the dead. It was a highly controversial event, and by concentrating on the unequivocal goodness of the clergyman Dickens may have hoped to mitigate the public sense of shock. The incident illustrates the self-sufficiency of the act of charity: the fate of the victims is irreversible; the clergyman draws no lessons and proposes no reforms. He does his 'Master's service' by performing acts of charity towards the dead and their families. (*UT* II p16)

Tension between charity and social work emerges in this paper over the issue of payment to the local fishermen for bringing in the corpses, which Dickens justifies in terms of the interruption of their normal work. It is a small point, but it marks a limit to the extent to which society can rely on charity for tidying up its troubles. McKee's account makes it clear that the villagers were brave in assisting the rescue, and generous to the survivors, and yet held to the fishing village tradition 'that everything thrown up by the sea is theirs by right'.[16] In an atmosphere in which the *Daily Telegraph* called for the death penalty for the 'greedy Cambro-British thieves',[17] Dickens wisely restricts his comment on the village not growing rich to the context of payment for retrieving bodies, and refers only in passing to 'some loss of sovereigns ... [which] had drifted in with the sand, and been scattered far and wide over the beach, like sea-shells'. (*UT* II p5) While not joining in the attacks on the villagers, neither does he refer to the undoubted bravery of the twenty-eight men who risked their lives on the rocks, pulling survivors from the sea. They did not, like Ham in *David Copperfield*, do the conspicuously brave thing and swim out with a line to the ship, so perhaps he does not grasp the dangers they faced.

There is naturally more about religion in this paper than in others but it is not the Church that provides the focus for the comfort of the bereaved. The Church building is, in fact, little more than a morgue, with a pan of pitch, the stains of sea

16 *The Golden Wreck* ch10 p120.
17 Quoted in *The Golden Wreck* ch11 p127.

water on the stones, and a Crusoe-ish collection of boots. It is the proximity of the clergyman's home that consecrates the place.

> ... I seemed to have happily come, in a few steps, from the churchyard with its open grave, which was the type of Death, to the Christian dwelling side by side with it, which was the type of Resurrection. ... If I had lost any one dear to me in this unfortunate ship, if I had made a voyage from Australia to look at the grave in the churchyard, I should go away, thankful to GOD that that house was so close to it, and that its shadow by day and its domestic lights by night fell upon the earth in which its Master had so tenderly laid my dear one's head.
>
> (*UT* II p10)

The beatification of the home can hardly go further than this. But one thinks of a more famous Dickensian graveyard, and what poor comfort David thinks it is for his father to be buried within sight of a happy home:

> ... my first childish associations with his white gravestone ... the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were – almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes – bolted and locked against it.
>
> (*DC* ch 1 pp50f)

The child's eye and 'indefinable compassion' remind us that the idea of home implies a shutting out as well as a welcoming in. Treating the home as the locus of charity reinforces the sense of charity as self-sufficient and indifferent to larger causes and effects, and therefore makes charity seem an inadequate model for social action.

Home for Homeless Women

The critical idea of *home* is given more twists in the home for homeless women, Urania Cottage, which Dickens describes in a paper for *Household Words* in 1853.[18] The women qualifying as 'homeless' within the meaning of the project include

> starving needle-women of good character, poor needlewomen who have robbed their furnished lodgings, violent girls committed to prison for disturbances in ill-conducted workhouses, poor girls from Ragged Schools, destitute girls who have applied at Police offices for relief, young women from the streets: young women of the same class taken from the prisons after undergoing punishment there as disorderly characters, or for shoplifting, or for thefts from the person: domestic

[18] An earlier period than *The Uncommercial Traveller*, which may account for the greater confidence of this paper. The home, Urania Cottage, was a project that Dickens was so deeply involved in himself, that he might not be entirely unbiased. The letters he exchanged with Angela Burdett-Coutts on the subject give a greater impression of difficulties and failures than the *Household Words* article, but this does not imply that the article is misleading. The letters deal with day to day problems. Dickens and Miss Coutts were busy people, unlikely to exchange many letters merely for the purpose of mutual congratulation (although there is a certain amount of that too).

> servants who have been seduced, and two young women held to bail for attempting suicide.
>
> (*HW* 23 April 1853 'Home for Homeless Women', *MP* p369)

The idea of home and homelessness implied here is more a moral idea than a matter of whether they have a roof over their head. One group, young women from the streets, is slipped into the list unobtrusively, but it is plain from the letters concerning the establishment of the home that it was set up specifically for prostitutes. Probably readers of *Household Words* would understand this.[19] Edgar Johnson quotes this list and suggests that over the first five or six years of the scheme the range of women taken into the home widened to include these other classes in addition to prostitutes.[20] This may imply a change in policy, perhaps due to a recognition that not many prostitutes were suitable cases for the Home. Respectable society would probably think there is little difference between 'violent girls committed to prison for disturbances in ill-conducted workhouses' and 'young women from the streets', and see all these groups as recruiting grounds for prostitution. *Starving needle-women* recalls the assault on Kate Nickleby's virtue while she was a poor needle-woman, and suggests that Amy Dorrit's situation should be seen as morally perilous, underlining Arthur Clennam's need to be cautious.

If members of these other outcast groups who are not in fact 'fallen' were nonetheless regarded as suitable for Urania Cottage, it tells us something about the class-attitudes of the authorities there. A woman who is fallen, but does not belong to an outcast group, receives very different treatment. Catherine Maynard Thompson was the mistress of a businessman, and used money from her lover to educate her brother and sister. Suddenly abandoned when her lover went bankrupt, she turned to prostitution. Dickens finds her case 'very remarkable'. She does not fit his idea of a fallen woman:

> The kind of life she leads, is far from being as bad as you might suppose, and, to prevent it being worse than it is, she has parted with everything in the way of

---

19 In Wilkie Collins's *The New Magdalen* (twenty years after this article) the phrase 'woman from a refuge' is used to mean a former prostitute.

20 Edgar Johnson, *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 1841-1865* p100.

> personal ornament. ... She is rather small, and young-looking; but pretty, and gentle, and has a very good head. Her manner was exceedingly natural to the circumstances in which I saw her, and she greatly strengthened my previous disposition to be interested in her. ... She could not be placed on a level with our Shepherd's Bush girls. Her manner, character, and experiences, are altogether different.
>
> (Letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 11th December 1854)

Catherine's brother, articled to an architect until her lover's money ran out, can give respectable men, with respectable addresses, as references. No doubt this counts for something, and so too do her gentle manner and good head.

> She had only one course of life open to her [after her lover left],[21] and she has pursued it ever since. She has a child; a little girl of two years old, to whom she is devoted. Although she is what she is, in the very house to which her brother goes home every night of his life, he has an unbounded respect and love for her, which presents one of the strangest and most bewildering spectacles I ever saw within my remembrance. ... I really had a difficulty in collecting myself to understand that in the tremendous circumstances of their daily existence, she has not fallen in this brother's *respect*.
>
> (Letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 16-17? November 1854)

Dickens is making a great effort to understand and sympathise with this challenging case, but is he always ready to make corresponding efforts to understand the Shepherd's Bush girls?

In what sense is Urania Cottage a home ? The women are locked in, deprived of their own clothes, denied privacy even to the extent of not being allowed to make their own beds, and 'any inmate missing from her usual place for ten minutes would be looked after'. (*MP* p376) Intimate relationships between inmates are rare, and their confined conditions make them quarrel. Dickens says that some of the methods used in the home could usefully be employed in prisons. Furthermore the condition of entering the 'home' is that it should be as a preparation for emigration within a year or so. Many good things can doubtless be said about this institution, but it seems too bleak and temporary to be called a home to the inmates, except in the sense that it is the moral antithesis of their previous 'homelessness'. This extension of the word *home* is more comprehensible if we bear in mind that many a real family home would include servants for whom life was no less regimented and

---

21 The fact that Dickens can write this, and the fact that even with the backing of Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts Catherine was indeed unable to establish herself in any more respectable course of life in England, are eloquent testimony to the pressures and disabilities suffered by women on their own.

no less bleak, but nothing could be further from the dolls' houses in which some of Dickens's heroes and heroines set up home. And yet, apparently, for those whom the regime suited, home is what it was and the eventual parting was hard.

The opening sentence of 'Home for Homeless Women' says much about Dickens's attitude to charity as the solution to social problems.

> Five years and a half ago, certain ladies, grieved to think that numbers of their own sex were wandering about the streets in degradation, passing through and through the prisons all their lives, or hopelessly perishing in other ways, resolved to try the experiment on a limited scale of a Home for the reclamation and emigration of women.
>
> (*MP* p368)

There is something businesslike and precise about the 'five and a half years' and the 'certain ladies'. Charity originates at a certain time, amongst certain people. It also originates in a feeling ('grieved'), a feeling of sympathy ('grieved ... their own sex'). These opening phrases are modest and quiet, but Dickens suddenly hits us with a big word ('degradation'), whose abstraction is immediately given vivid meaning ('passing through and through the prisons'). Then the vivid picture has, in a rather typical Dickensian way, a curiously vague phrase tagged onto it ('perishing in other ways'), a blank which we know stands for drink, violence and venereal disease. Then we are back to the modest and businesslike tone ('experiment on a limited scale'), which is then heightened by the emotive 'Home' with a capital H. There is then the presumably unconscious paradox that it is a home for emigration, and the last word reminds us that though the objects of this charity are the same sex as their benefactors, they are not ladies.

This enterprise is a paradigm of Dickens's view of charity as a solution to social ills. It has its origin in the good feeling of brisk and practical people. '"Don't talk about it, do it!" is the motto of the place.' (*MP* p375) It works by extending the virtues of the middle class home out into the frightening world of the degraded poor. And there is the element of harshness that Dickens thought essential. It is not quite 'seizing and saving', but it involves the enforced separation of the inmates from their old associates; the systematic wearing down of their old personalities; and finally, emigration. Emigration was a much favoured social remedy, and one

which well illustrates the ambivalence of the social remedy. On one side it is a powerful and possibly cruel instrument of social engineering; on the other it carries a profoundly personal offer of moral regeneration and the opportunity (for the women of the Home) of marriage to a man who will not be too concerned about their past.[22]

Above all, the enterprise is small in scale. But although it is small, and although it has its origin in good feeling, it does not come down to the personal kindliness of a Brownlow. Certainly, it does not offer a universal solution, and its success depends above all on the personality of the superintendents, their 'cheerfulness, quickness, good-temper, firmness and vigilance'. (*MP* p370) The letters to Angela Burdett-Coutts make it plain that the women employed as superintendents varied in quality. However it is a social rather than personal enterprise in that it has identified a general problem and is dedicated to finding a means of processing that problem's successive victims. Elsewhere in Dickens's accounts of charitable enterprises, we feel qualms about his use of the idea of the home as an engine of social improvement, but in the account of this particular 'Home' he is quite level-headed about certain decidedly unhomely qualities that it has to have.

The most decidedly unhomely feature is the power of expulsion. Dickens himself often took the judicial role, condemning or reprieving with absolute authority. At Christmas time in 1853, for example, he relents towards Rhona Pollard, in honour of 'the great forgiving Christian time'.[23] The commitment of the authorities in the home to their charges is not the unconditional commitment of a parent to a child. Like servants, the girls live with the threat of instant dismissal.

> The girl herself, now it had really come to this, cried and hung down her head, and when she got out at the door, stopped and leaned against the house for a minute or two before she went to the gate – in a most miserable and wretched state. As it was

---

22 Dickens, like Carlyle (for example in *Chartism* ch10, *Critical & Miscellaneous Essays* vol 4 pp192 & 203), believed intensely in emigration as a social remedy, and also as a means of personal regeneration. The emigrants in *David Copperfield* spend their last night in England at Hungerford Steps, scene of Dickens's own deepest plunge into social degradation, as though when the Peggottys and Micawbers sail to Australia they carry off their author's shame. (*DC* ch57 p874)

23 Letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 4 January 1854.

> impossible to relent, with any hope of doing good, we could not do so. ... A more forlorn and hopeless thing altogether, I never saw.
>
> (Letter to Dr William Brown, 6 November 1849)

> We pitied such deluded creatures, and knew the remorse that always came upon them as soon as they were outside the gate; but the greatest object of our pity was the miserable girl in the streets who really would try hard to do well if she could get into the Home, and whose place was unjustly occupied by such a girl as this.
>
> (Letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 4 January 1854)

The essential quality of a true home, as somewhere where one has an unconditional right to live, is sacrificed to maximise the range and effectiveness of the 'home' as instrument of social policy. The argument Dickens uses here echoes the tract he wrote to invite women to enter Urania Cottage:

> You must solemnly remember that if you enter this Home without such constant resolutions, you will occupy, unworthily and uselessly, the place of some other unhappy girl, now wandering and lost; and that her ruin, no less than your own, will be upon your head.
>
> ('An Appeal to Fallen Women' in a letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 28 October 1847)

In both passages, although he is developing the idea of home into something more impersonal, he does it in highly personal terms. He forces us to picture an individual 'miserable girl in the streets', and asserts a very dubious relationship of responsibility between those occupying places in the Home and 'some other unhappy girl ...'

Centralization and state action

Dickens preferred the small scale in charitable and social undertakings and believed in the ability of individuals to have an effect upon social problems, whether by virtue of their strength of character or qualities such as briskness, or by virtue of their long purses. There are many articles in *All the Year Round* in which the authors, (and Dickens, insofar as he gave editorial approval to the articles[24]) acknowledge the limitations of individual action, and the need for larger-scale organization. The discussion often turns upon the term *centralization*. In *Our*

[24] Dickens's tight supervision of the contents of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, particularly on issues where his own position was publicly known, is sufficiently well attested to need no comment. See, for example, the anecdotes and comments collected by F G Kitton in *Charles Dickens, his Life, Writings and Personality* (London, 1902) pp423-430. See also R C Lehmann *Charles Dickens as Editor* (London, 1912) pp317 & 324. Attribution of authorship of particular articles is based upon Ella Ann Oppenlander, *Dickens's All the Year Round: Descriptive Index and Contributor List* (NY 1984).

Mutual Friend, Mr Podsnap, arguing for doing nothing about social problems (specifically, six recent cases of people dying in the streets of starvation) uses *centralization* as a polysyllabic bugbear: 'Centralization. No. Never with my consent. Not English.' (*OMF* I 11 p187) Dickens's mouthpiece in this conversation, a 'man of meek demeanour', while sticking to his point that something should be done, seems inclined to share Podsnap's suspicion of centralization.

The Lives and Deaths of the People

Housing, public health, working conditions and industrial injuries are recurrent topics in *All the Year Round*. As the title of one of the most comprehensive articles, 'The Lives and Deaths of the People'[25] makes clear, these are matters of life and death. The article claims to be based upon reports made by John Simon under the Public Health Act (1858) to the Privy Council concerning preventable premature death. The basic assumption is that such deaths can be prevented, and that it is the business of the government to ensure their prevention.[26]

State intervention can take different forms, the most obvious being legislation. The article favours a law to compel parents to have their children vaccinated, supporting this view by pointing out that vaccination has eliminated smallpox in cities such as Copenhagen and Baden – not an argument likely to persuade Podsnap. An earlier article makes the same suggestion, adding the proviso that there should be a 'special officer' to maintain the vaccination lists.[27] Here state intervention is not merely a matter of a remote parliament laying down the law, but also requires the creation of a mechanism of supervision and control. This is just one new officer, but Podsnap is right to detect in such proposals something that will grow and change the character of society. The article distracts our attention

---

25 *AYR* 8 October 1864.

26 Experience in the 1860s in this area points to the increasing irrelevance of the centralization argument in matters of sanitation. The anti-centralizers appeared to have won in 1858 when the second General Board of Health was abolished, but in practice even the most independent-minded local authorities needed advice from the centre and a reluctant central government was obliged to intervene more and more. See Royston Lambert, 'Central and Local Relations in Mid-Victorian England: The Local Government Act Office, 1858-1871', *Victorian Studies* December 1962.

27 'Poor Law Doctors', *AYR* 8 December 1860

from these larger social implications by its typically Dickensian eye for detail, picking up a reference to 'some very fine vaccine scars ... in Lambeth Infant School, the work of Doctor Smyth', and commenting: 'So it is not only in works from the desk or the easel that a good critic recognises the distinctive artist hand.'[28]

'The Lives and Deaths of the People' goes on to consider food, with reference to the 'carbon and nitrogen' theory of Edward Smith. According to the theory, the requirement for a woman is 3900 grains of carbon and 180 grains of nitrogen, and for a man one ninth more. The writer of the article immediately translates this into more accessible terms –

> ... nothing very theoretical or far-fetched, or incredible, in the assertion that a healthy working woman must eat at least a half-quartern loaf every day, and that a man must eat a loaf and a thick slice of another ... and is likely to fail in health if fed below that standard.
>
> ('The Lives and Deaths of the People' p200)

– and while generally approving of Dr Smith's work, is all the time keen to move on to more concrete examples of how questions of diet are related to the circumstances of people's lives. For example, these are the advantages of bacon: it yields dripping for the children and for boiling cabbage in; it is savoury when fried with greens and potatoes; it can be stored; and it is sold by the grocer, who is more willing than the butcher to give credit. There is also a reminder that statistics do not tell the whole truth. Dr Smith regrets that the poor prefer the 'cheerful refreshment' of tea to convert their bread into a warm meal, rather than milk, and the writer comments that the carbon and nitrogen theory 'is not large enough to comprehend a reason' for the popularity of tea and coffee.

The article also discusses illness and premature death brought on by conditions of work, referring to the work of Dr Robert Barnes on scurvy. Barnes claims that scurvy is well understood, and never found among officers, and that it could be almost eliminated if the Merchant Shipping Act were obeyed. This is taken up by another article later the same month where ways are discussed of making the Act 'more firmly operative' against those owners still sacrificing their common sailors

---

28 'The Lives and Deaths of the People' p199.

in order to 'wring money out of their very lives'.[29] Measures include systematic inspection of ships before sailing, a requirement that there should be an inquest on all deaths from scurvy, and an obligation on masters or owners to pay compensation. The most interesting suggestion is that no insurance should be paid for the loss of ships where scurvy is present, implying that a regulatory mechanism is available within the commercial system, which does not depend upon legislation. The use of insurance as a mechanism of enforcement is recommended in 'A Plea for Coal Miners'.[30]

'Workmen's Diseases' describes several industrial processes, such as those involving lead and mercury, in which technical advances and improvements in ventilation and hygiene still leave certain ineradicable dangers, but the emphasis is on the advances and on what could be achieved by the enforcement of 'proper and reasonable regulations'.[31] Since technical knowledge is increasing, we are tempted to feel that things are inevitably getting better. This is the suggestion in an article by Henry Morley, written to celebrate Peak Frean & Co and the invention of aerated bread. After describing the progress of bread-making across the centuries, and the harmful effects felt by makers of fermented bread in London, Morley writes:

> ... these results follow not upon the cruelty of grasping masters, who enrich themselves at the cost of other men's lives; but upon the necessity of poor men following a trade that yields them little profit. ... We may surely be thankful enough for an advance made in our understanding of the art of bread-making, which has changed the rising of dough into an instantaneous act, and produces in an hour and a half out of a sack of flour, baked loaves whereinto there have been no men's lives kneaded.
>
> ('Ceres at Dockhead', *AYR* 3 March 1860 p444)

He takes a deterministic view. The suffering of traditional baking workers was inevitable given the state of knowledge at the time, and the solution follows no less inevitably upon the development of new technology. But he is too quick to exonerate the society that, in the past, kneaded men's lives into loaves. Granted that traditional master bakers have always been too poor to provide satisfactory

---

29 'Workmen's Diseases', *AYR*, 29 October 1864.p274.

30 *AYR*, 12 May 1860.

31 'Workmen's Diseases' p275.

working conditions for themselves and their men, this doesn't mean that there is no greed and cruelty involved. What keeps the bakers poor is the requirement of other industries to keep down the cost of bread, so as to keep down wages. The image of men's lives kneaded into loaves has something of Ruskin about it, but Morley does not have the sort of grasp of connections which is found in Ruskin, as when he says that 'every young lady ... who buys glass beads is engaged in the slave trade'.[32]

Despite a pervading confidence in progress, *All the Year Round* does not suggest that improvement can be left to depend on the inevitable increase of knowledge. It insists on enforcement through legislation and inspection, which means giving more power to state officials, extending the role of coroners, increasing the number of inspectors and creating procedures for collecting and analysing information.

The Post Office is seen as an important instrument for state action on behalf of the poor. Two articles by Andrew Halliday support schemes for extending the role of the Post Office. [33] The first applauds the introduction of the Post Office Savings Bank, and the second urges its extension to provide the facilities of a friendly society. Both advocate government sponsored replacements for small, locally managed clubs, which are often badly or dishonestly administered, and which, being based in shops or public-houses, are not effective incentives to save. The Post Office, as well as being a channel for state action, also offers a model for effective action in other spheres. An article calling for the harmonization (in effect the nationalisation) of the railways puts the centralizer's problem like this: 'each line should be arranged in harmony with the main system, but with minute reference to the convenience of the district served by it.'[34] One method for organizing the railways is described as 'intermediate between the companies' system and the penny post system'.[35] The national penny post demonstrates the possibility of combining a uniform national system with regard for local peculiarities.

---

32 *Stones of Venice* II vi §17, *Works* vol10 p197.

33 'My Account with Her Majesty' and 'Exceedingly Odd Fellows', *AYR*, 5 March and 16 April 1864.

34 'The Steam's Highway', *AYR*, 18 March 1865 p179.

35 'The Steam's Highway' p178.

Wholesale distress

We have looked at articles in which the assumption is that the way to secure effective social action is through state intervention – an increase in state powers and, potentially, a fundamental change in the relationship between individual and state. When Podsnap objects to centralization it is primarily, one suspects, because he identifies it with this increase in state powers. How far are his fears justified?

In *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge* the representatives of state authority do not appear well, being at once brutal and ineffectual. Later novels show the old guard of beadles and justices being replaced by a modern police force, for which Dickens has some respect, but there is little or no confidence in the state as a power capable of initiating and overseeing positive social developments. Although *All the Year Round* insists on the state's potential role in social improvement, the shadow of the Circumlocution Office is never far away. The writer of 'The Steam's Highway' seems sure of his readers' reaction when he emphasises that he is not advocating handing over to the Circumlocution Office the task of developing a national railway system.[36]

When many state institutions (the magistracy, church and poor law machinery) were local, non-state institutions often led the centralizing tendency. In two articles on the Lancashire cotton famine of 1862, the writer describes 'wholesale distress,' the relief of which is 'beyond the reach of townships or boards of guardians, or any purely local machinery.'[37] The poor rates are levied from those who are themselves affected by the general depression in the region, and so the only chance of effective relief is from public benevolence on a national scale.

The articles range from vivid glimpses of individual suffering and detailed descriptions of the machinery by which soup is dispensed (carried from the coppers down to the serving 'troughs', through a 'sort of fireman's hose') to magisterial

36 'The Steam's Highway' p179.

37 'An Act of Mercy' (Part 2), *AYR*, 27 December 1862 p376

pronouncements on issues of public morality.[38] The writer draws attention to the general ignorance of conditions in the manufacturing districts, thinking not so much of the lives of the workers as of the economic situation of the masters:

> ... we make a mistake when, as we steam through these districts, we note the mighty chimneys on each side of the way, and assume that each one of them is a sort of alchemist's furnace, in which the men of Lancashire are turning tufts of cotton into bars of gold.
>
> ('An Act of Mercy' (Part 2) p377)

Small-scale manufacturers have all their savings tied up in now idle machinery. Many cotton-masters are either contributing to the Relief Fund, or keeping their mills working at a loss, but there is not enough money in the manufacturing region to meet the emergency – hence the need for a 'general fund to which all England should subscribe'. There is no suggestion that this general fund should be levied compulsorily, even though the writer brings forward what might be thought a good argument for such compulsion, that the cotton industry of Lancashire has relieved parishes throughout England of 'large instalments of their poor'.[39]

If the money was indeed forthcoming from voluntary contributions, the writer might be forgiven for failing to see the necessity for *state-imposed* centralization, but other parts of his account point to the weakness of an amateur and voluntary solution. The task of supervising the operation in each of the affected towns is huge, and there are conditions imposed on certain handouts (for example, to prevent donated blankets from being pawned) which imply a quasi-judicial function for the administrators. Dickens himself accepted such a role in regard to Urania Cottage, and apparently saw nothing wrong with it, but as such undertakings grow in size, it is hard to see how they can be carried on without some official standing. The administration of even small-scale charities by more or less self-appointed figures gives rise to acrimony.[40]

---

38 'An Act of Mercy' (Part 2) p373. This fireman's hose recalls how, in the construction of the London Underground, the sewage of 50,000 homes was 'safely caged' in a 'large boiler-looking tube'. ('Some Railway Points' *AYR*, 26 January 1861, p372) What the passages have in common is an interest in finding impressive engineering solutions to the problems posed by the scale of urban problems.

39 'An Act of Mercy' (Part 2) p376.

40 See for example 'Parish Charities', *AYR*, 23 May 1863 pp308f.

There is also the problem of finding voluntary workers to keep going an undertaking of the scale and complexity of the cotton Relief Fund.

> Men have followed out this object of feeding the hungry as if it were some lucrative occupation in which they were engaging for their own especial benefit. They have passed their days in inquiring into the condition of these suffering people, and their evenings in taking counsel how to meet their wants. Little things done continually, small acts performed habitually, are really the severest of trials, and exceed in importance those rare heroic achievements which are done once for all under the pressure of excitement and then are over. To get up night after night with your dinner in your throat, and leave your comfortable fireside and your friends, in order that you may devote a portion of your evening to the organization of a soup-kitchen, involves, especially after the thing has lasted some time, a considerable amount of principle and self-sacrifice.
>
> ('An Act of Mercy' (Part 2) p372)

This states the problem, without recognising the consequence that, in the end those who do this sort of work, like the fisherman who brought the Royal Charter victims for burial, need to be paid for their time. This would not necessarily imply state provision. The Columbia Square housing project demonstrates that sufficient profit can be made from good quality housing for the poor 'to engage the attention of the purely commercial man'.[41] There is a strong suggestion that the benevolence practised by the mill-owners during the cotton famine will have beneficial consequences for them in terms of better relations with their work people, who will come to see that they are not regarded merely as part of the 'machinery'.[42]

A belief in improvement, undoubtedly one of the leading strands in the ideology of *All the Year Round*, is expressed in the final passage in 'An Act of Mercy' in a *machine* metaphor:

> ... the machinery of mercy ... has been set in motion by means of public benevolence only. I believe that that machinery will assuredly be kept going, just as long as that other machinery which stands idle in the Lancashire factories remains inactive. I believe that it will want neither fuel to keep it in motion, nor oil to lubricate and brighten it. And I should not be surprised if, one day or other, it should turn out that the setting that machinery going, was a good speculation after all, and brought back to those who invested in the benevolent undertaking a better profit than some of them ever thought of looking for.
>
> ('An Act of Mercy' (Part 2) p378)

41 'Hail Columbia – Square!', *AYR*, 7 June 1862 p305.

42 'And Act of Mercy' (Part 2) pp 376 & 378.

This is not blind faith in inevitable social advance. The writer is quite clear about the grounds on which he bases his expectation of a return upon the benevolent investment.

The first is that he sees the support given by the mill-owners to their distressed workers as contributing to the harmony between the classes which writers on social unrest were whistling for throughout the 1840s and 1850s – see, for example, Dickens's papers 'On Strike' and 'To Working Men'.[43] It is not a purely mechanistic matter of *quid pro quo* – we hear of masters and men brought into 'familiar contact' by the troubles, and of the 'memory of kind offices'.[44] One thinks of the inter-class solidarity brought about by shared suffering in *Mary Barton* and *North and South.*

The second ground for optimism is education. Part of the work of the Relief Fund is to provide classes for men forced into idleness, described enthusiastically in the article. And this prospect of intellectual improvement takes up a point made earlier connecting the patience of the unemployed with the spread of popular literature: 'The people are taught to reason about their misfortunes. They learn that no tyranny is being exercised over them.'[45]

What we have in these two articles is an account of a large-scale act of national, public benevolence, apparently successful, and apparently containing within itself the seeds of further benevolence in the future. Accurate or not, they suggest that there is a degree of credibility in the notion that wholesale distress can be assuaged without that fundamental disturbance of the relation between state and individual to which Podsnap gives the un-English name of centralization. But the Relief Fund highlights certain key centralizing elements, in particular the need to supplement local funds from national sources, and the need to adjudicate entitlement to relief. Whether these trends in the long run imply centralized *state* provision and regulation of welfare is questionable. If we look at Europe, we might think that

---

43 *HW*, 11 February 1854 & 7 October 1854, *MP* pp423-436 & 452ff.
44 'An Act of Mercy' (Part 2) p376.
45 'An Act of Mercy' (Part 1) p348.

they do, but if we look at the United States of America, where anti-statism is if anything more emphatic than in Podsnap's dining-room, the implication is less clear.

All the Year Round looks at these issues in an American context. 'A Lesson Well Learnt'[46] deals with the development of the US Sanitary Commission and its care of the wounded and dead in the War between the States. The lesson referred to in the title is that of Florence Nightingale – so the article starts with a forceful example of the impact that a strong individual can make upon a large problem. As described in the *Times*[47] the Sanitary Commission was established by the Federal authorities to apply the science of 'military hygiene' to sustain the effectiveness of their new army, but *All the Year Round* emphasises rather the contribution made to its development by the Women's Central Association of Relief, and numerous local aid societies.

> One by one the work of women's love that strove to follow the particular fortunes of brothers and friends was gathered into one great national effort, and the local aid societies became branches of the commission.
>
> ('A Lesson Well Learnt' p329)

The role of women is crucial, and, although the article notes that they have had advice from 'men of experience', the writer plainly enjoys anecdotes in which women, in defence of their wounded charges, overcome obstruction from men in authority. A nurse describes an argument she and her companion have with a ship's captain: 'Mrs – and I looked at him. I did the terrible and she the pathetic, – and he abandoned the contest.'[48] The nurse who 'did the terrible' would, one feels, meet with Mrs Pardiggle's approval. The article presents a series of statistics reminiscent of Mr Quale: 1500 reports, 180 questions, 6000 barrels of fresh vegetables, a million dollars raised from 'Sanitary Fairs' in New York, £100,000 in gold from California. In this article, as in those on the cotton famine, there is the raw material for a defence of the charitable ladies of *Bleak House*. Wholesale

---

46 *AYR*, 14 May 1864.

47 25 January 1862, reprinted in Brogan (ed), *The Times Reports: the American Civil War* (London 1975) pp49-53.

48 'A Lesson Well Learnt' p330.

distress needs wholesale charity – not Esther's basket or Snagsby's half-crown, but 6000 barrels and a million dollars.

The women have to overcome opposition not only from obstinate sailors but from the Secretary for War and the Surgeon General. They have to move from supplementing the government's provision for the wounded to taking control of it. Partly they do this by capturing organs of power, by getting their candidate appointed as Surgeon General, and their policy enacted as a bill in Congress. To this extent the pressure from the Association of Relief has the effect of increasing centralised government intervention and control. But another element in the process has the opposite tendency, since the government passed certain powers back to a voluntary body, the Sanitary Commission.

After the Civil War, the United States saw an increase in the scope of non-government bodies, with charitable, academic and commercial organizations assuming powers which elsewhere were exercised by governments. These trends show that there was no single unambiguous model for how large-scale relief of suffering should be undertaken. Dickens remains attached to the idea of the individual benefactor rather than state-controlled welfare, but is aware of the principal weakness of his position: what happens when individuals responding to large-scale social problems are forced to take on quasi-governmental roles, gathering systematic information, raising large sums of money and doing the terrible in the face of vice and obscurantism?

The Boffins' experience

The limits of charity

Dickens's journalism wrestles with the problem of the relationship between the comfortable and the wretched. In the novels it is the chink and glint of money which is often the emblem of this uncomfortable relationship. Mr Snagsby's half-crown left upon the table in Tom-all-alone's, his 'usual panacea for an immense variety of afflictions' (*BH* ch22 p368), illustrates the pathos and futility of piecemeal

good-intentions. The coins, given in charity, and first kissed and then spurned by Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son*, remind us that money that passes from hand to hand is seldom free of human, and frequently painful, meaning. It is not easy for the rich to give money to the poor:

> ... Eugene tells out the money; beginning incautiously by telling the first shilling into Mr Dolls's hand, which instantly jerks it out of the window; and ending by telling the fifteen shillings on the seat.
>
> (*OMF* III 17 p694)

The Boffins encounter a series of frustrations: the futility of their individual efforts, the difficult and irrational sensitivity of the recipients of charity, and the tendency of relationships involving money to be degraded and dehumanised. And they learn. Beneath the play-acting that they undertake for Bella's enlightenment, they are developing an insight into the meaning and use of their wealth.

At first they take to charity as part of their 'acting up' to their fortune, which includes Mrs Boffin's attempts at fashion and Mr Boffin's appointment of a literary man. (*OMF* I 9) [49] Resolving to adopt a child to take the place of the John Harmon they believe they have lost, they encounter the market in orphans and need the guidance of the Reverend Milvey and his wife to find their way through its pitfalls. The Milveys have an 'orphan warehouse' (*OMF* I 9 p151), which recalls Mrs Pardiggle and her wholesale charity, but here it is the poor who turn themselves into commodities. This same process, whereby the poor turn charity into a commercial relationship, is seen in the 'dismal swamp' of begging letters, in which individual scroungers are aligned with corporate charities whose lithographed letters solicit donors by the thousand. (*OMF* I 17 p259) The model provided by the Milveys is important. Dickens talks about the 'good clergyman or doctor' as the only reliable links between the worlds of the comfortable and the wretched. (*D&S* ch47 p737) The clergyman and doctor are neither private individuals nor wholesale institutions.

---

[49] This willed and conscious attempt to do the right thing, when all along they have an instinct to do right, an instinct which even Old Harmon recognised in them, is an aspect of the complex psychology of virtue which interested Dickens. Their phrase 'acting up' is reminiscent of Mark Tapley's way of describing his instinct to do right as a desire to 'come out strong'.

When the Boffins' orphan, who has already been given the name John Harmon, dies in the Children's Hospital before he can take up residence with them, they debate whether to adopt a second child and pass on the name. Mrs Boffin feels instinctively that this would be wrong. It is not 'superstition' but a 'matter of feeling'. (*OMF* II 10 p389) She recognises that what she proposed giving to little Johnny, her undivided and unconditional love, is not a solution she can offer to everybody's problems. It cannot be transferred from one object to another, as one inmate might replace another at Urania Cottage. Mrs Boffin describes her more limited scheme in these terms:

> A well-disposed boy comes in my way who ... is honest and industrious and requires a helping hand and deserves it. If I am very much in earnest and quite determined to be unselfish, let me take care of *him*.
>
> (*OMF* II 10 p390)

She specifies that her well-disposed boy should not be pretty or prepossessing, so that there can be no temptation to treat him as a pet or plaything. Her charity must not be too easy.[50]

Betty Higden

The Boffins still have to come to grips with Betty Higden and her indomitable independence. It occurs to them to settle her as housekeeper to Silas Wegg in the Bower, which shows them thinking of their dependants as abstractions, as units which can be stowed away in the same house, without considering their individual characters. (*OMF* II 14 p448) Reluctantly they accept that they can do nothing for her except lend her the little bit of money needed to set her up as a pedlar, and give her a letter with their name so that if she falls sick she will be known to have friends. This letter gives Mr Boffin's instinct the chance to express itself in his repudiation of the title of 'patron'. (*OMF* II 14 p447) Instead of the debased relationship of patron, they call themselves Betty Higden's friends. Of course this is not friendship in the full sense, any more than the Home for Homeless Women is a

---

50 Considered in the abstract, the limited help they propose for Sloppy is the same as that given to Charley Hexam: education. But Sloppy does not lose contact with his origins. It is not his education but the two peculiar skills that he developed in his time with Betty Higden, sleeping on his feet, and mimicking a variety of accents, that enable him to play his part in the overthrow of Silas Wegg.

home in the full sense, but friendship is the closest model they can find for their relationship with the object of their charity. It is closer to real friendship than Mr Veneering's relationship with his oldest friend Twemlow.

In order to be charitable to Betty Higden, the Boffins must avoid treating her as an object of charity. She has a horror of charity, of which Dickens approves. Her self-reliance is a stick with which he beats both the administrators of the Poor Law (the frequently apostrophized Honourable Boards) and the feckless, whining poor like Mr Dolls or Silas Wegg. We see her fleeing in terror from the clutches of the workhouse, praying that any good Samaritan will pass by on the other side, leaving her to herself. Her happy ending comes when she finds someone, Lizzie Hexam, to be with her, and kiss her, at the moment of death. (*OMF* III 8) Betty mistakes Lizzie for the 'Boofer Lady', that is Bella, who kissed little Johnny as he lay dying in the Children's Hospital. Both Lizzie and Bella act instinctively and generously to give comfort at the point of death, and this charity is contrasted with that of the false Samaritans of the workhouse. The link back to the Children's Hospital reminds us that not all charitable institutions share the inhumanity of the workhouse, since there is room in the hospital for the ministrations of the Boofer lady.

This chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* can be objected to on several grounds. It represents the acceptance of charity as something shameful.

> Now, she would light upon the shameful spectacle of some desolate creature – or some wretched ragged groups of either sex, or of both sexes, with children among them, huddled together like the smaller vermin, for a little warmth – lingering and lingering on a doorstep, while the appointed evader of the public trust did his dirty office of trying to weary them out and so get rid of them. Now, she would light upon some poor decent person ...
>
> (*OMF* III 8 p568)

Who is shamed by this spectacle? The poor, or the official who is maltreating them? Surely the official, but it is the poor who are likened to the 'smaller vermin'. Is Dickens suggesting that the official turns the poor into vermin by his treatment of them? This would be in keeping with the repeated denunciation of the 'Honourable Boards', but the tone of this passage suggests that Dickens feels that the poor have made themselves into vermin by their acceptance of charity. It is as

though we are coming up against the limits of his sympathy with the desperate poor, the limits which he seems to extend in 'A Small Star in the East', but re-establishes in 'On an Amateur Beat'. As Alexander Welsh says, to accept charity is represented as 'somehow to lose something, to break irreparably some hidden law, to cross some dividing line'.[51] The something that is lost is well summed up in the idea of *independence*. Geoffrey Best writes of the 'forms and institutions of the workhouse' as institutionalising the humiliation consequent on the failure to be independent: 'the relinquishing of personal possessions, the submission to ... a somewhat prison-like discipline, the separation from spouse and children.'[52] Dickens's harsh and extreme language in this passage suggest that whatever he might say about the working of the Poor Law, he shares some of the basic assumptions of those who framed it.

Another objection to this chapter is that Betty is not a good witness against the working of the poor law. Her knowledge of the workhouse is second-hand, picked up from hearsay and from the newspapers, and her fear of charity is 'phobic', since she is no less afraid of the Boffins' charity than of the workhouse. This is the view of Alexander Welsh, who dismisses Betty Higden as a mere 'creature of Victorian propaganda'.[53] It would be hard to find a first-hand witness against the workhouse since the burden of the complaint is that those who are once swallowed up by it never get free. If Dickens's remarks about the undeserving poor reveal the limits of his sympathy, his conception of Betty and her like talking about their friends' and family's experiences, and feeding each other's terrors by what they have to tell, shows how strong his sympathy can be as soon as his imagination is engaged. What he has grasped is that the poor, even when they are not very clever and not very rational, can see what is being done to them and can talk about it. Seeing the poor as 'the smaller vermin' becomes less easy as soon as they appear having conversations with each other, exchanging experiences and ideas.

---

51 *The City of Dickens* (Oxford, 1971) ch6 pp93 & 97.

52 *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London, 1971; second edition 1979) ch4 p282.

53 *The City of Dickens* ch6 p93.

Although Betty's phobic rejection of all charity, including that of the Boffins, makes her a prejudiced witness, it makes her a more credible character. There is something merely conventional about both the account of her past troubles (the deaths of all her children) and also about the physical descriptions of her with their emphasis on her bright eyes,[54] but there are touches that bring her to life and make her something more than a mere example of the deserving poor. The image of a child reading to an old woman is a powerful emblem of social improvement, and it is given substance by Dickens's appreciation of the excitement found by the uneducated in things that are gloomy and terrifying. Betty's grim pleasure in Sloppy's reading turns to real terror as she sees herself in the odd half-pence in the Registrar General's accounts. (*OMF* III 8 p568) What brings Betty to life more than anything is Sloppy's epitaph: 'O Mrs Higden, Mrs Higden, you was a woman and a mother and a mangler in a million million.' (*OMF* III 9 p578)

A recurrent motif in the development of a Dickens plot is sudden, determined but usually futile movement. Mrs Nubbles and the Single Gentleman on their fruitless search for Little Nell, Inspector Bucket and Esther following Lady Dedlock's false trail, David Copperfield taking off on an impulse for Yarmouth as the storm gathers, Mr Dorrit's last journey back to Italy, Mr Dombey pursuing Edith to France and Carker fleeing homeward, Pip and Magwitch on their desperate journey down river – such incidents are all strongly suggestive of the intense restlessness of Dickens's own character. Betty's refusal of the Boffins' help, her determination to provide for her own funeral, and her recourse to movement as a way of resisting the 'numbness' in her legs, are all suggestive of Dickens as he wore himself out on his reading tours. Betty is an expression of that belief in activity, which was for Dickens both a practical creed and an emotional necessity.

---

[54] Bright eyes are associated with self-reliance in a slightly odd little aside. Having described the litter of waste paper ('peculiar paper currency') blown about by the wind, Dickens remarks approvingly that in Paris 'sharp eyes and sharp stomachs reap even the east wind and get something of it.' (OMF I 12 p191) The remark (like some other passages in the book) sits oddly on the page, but what Dickens seems to be suggesting is that one way for the poor to be self-reliant is to become small-scale Old Harmons, each with his own Mound.

Following the precedent set in Betty's case, Boffin offers Wegg two pounds, which is refused. Immediately Wegg is picked up by Sloppy and dropped into a scavenger's cart, a fitting end for one who has spent so much of the novel sitting on a dusty corner or digging about in the Mounds, but not a convincing solution to the problem of what to do about the poor. We are left, therefore, with just two members of the underclass who are effectively raised from destitution by their contact with the rich in the course of the novel: Lizzie and Sloppy. Lizzie's case is hardly generalisable, and what we might conclude from Sloppy's is that the way he has got on is by attaching himself to a wealthy benefactor and behaving faithfully and openly towards him. It is not absolutely clear how such an example can be projected from the personal onto the social scale. Is there a Boffin for every Sloppy, a Garland for every Kit Nubbles? And if there is, what about all those amongst the poor who lack Kit and Sloppy's capacity for hard work and deference?

Conclusion

A general criticism levelled at Dickens's attacks on the treatment of the poor is that he has nothing to offer in its place. The criticism comes from two sides. Podsnap says that what Dickens is protesting about is something to which there is no alternative; later critics, such as Orwell, say that there is an alternative, socialism and the welfare state, but that Dickens fails to grasp it and takes refuge in the idea of personal philanthropy. Dickens and his fellow-writers on *All the Year Round* are plainly aware of the need to extend charity beyond the personal sphere, even if unsure how it is to be done. We have seen how Dickens offers, from time to time, certain models of public social action – the Cheerybles taking responsibility for the whole lives of their employees; the 'friendship' of the Boffins towards Betty Higden; and above all the extended notions of the home that we see in the Children's Hospital and Urania Cottage. It has to be said, however, that there is something schematic and unconvincing about these supposed social remedies.

In a way Dickens answers such criticism in the response made to Mr Podsnap by the meek man (*OMF* I 11): one doesn't need to know the answer to a problem in

order to recognise that a problem exists. Podsnap's tactic for denying the problem is roughly this: you cannot say how to remove these evils, so they cannot be removable, so they cannot really be evils. This is essentially Bagehot's argument in his article on Dickens, where he criticises him for hinting that the cruelties he describes are removable when in fact they are simply 'the necessary painfulness of due punishment and the necessary rigidity of established law'. Dickens, Bagehot concludes, objects to 'the necessary constitution of human society'.[55]

Dickens's refusal to commit himself to any 'ization' is not as irresponsible as Podsnap and Bagehot might imply. It is not just a way of saying he doesn't know what to do about the social evils he describes. He is also saying, as we would expect him to, that it is wrong to expect a single big, wholesale answer. What he would put in the place of badly administered workhouses are well administered workhouses, workhouses that do not terrorise their inmates, pauperise them, de-humanise them, workhouses administered by people who understand the condition of the poor, like the brisk Wapping matron, and the wise Stepney Board of Guardians, like the superintendents of the Home for Homeless Women and the doctors at the Children's Hospital – or perhaps like the 'intelligent gentlemen' at the lead-mill. But Dickens himself illustrates the difficulty, as he seems now to gain, now to lose, insight into the minds of the poor. At one moment he portrays them as thinking and feeling people, at another he regards them coldly and externally, and at another he sees them as vermin. What should we do? Should we listen to the fears and feelings of the poor, or should we 'seize and save' them?

Podsnap, Bagehot and Orwell are right: Dickens has no ready alternative to the institutions of his day. But this does not mean that his social thought is restricted to personal kindliness and the hangman's noose. Dickens is aware of the paradox of charity in the social sphere: that to be effective it has to be brusque, unfeeling and authoritarian, but that the objects of charity are, after all, objects towards which no charitable individual has a right to be brusque, unfeeling and authoritarian. This is

55 *The National Review*, October 1858; *Literary Studies* vol2 pp190ff.

why the perfection of charity is for him the charity which does not seek to push people into living in a certain way, but enables them to rest in peace. The perfect charity is that of the Welsh clergyman towards the relatives of those drowned in the Royal Charter, and the greatest gift of the Children's Hospital is the gift of a peaceful death, with a kiss from a beautiful lady.

Chapter 3: What is money?

Homes

The home is a crucial element in Dickens's social thinking, and one of his principal models for social and charitable action. While engaged on *Dombey & Son*, Dickens was involved in setting up the refuge at Urania Cottage. At first he refers to it as an asylum, but later declares that he intends to give it the name of Home.[1] The change, he plainly feels, has a significance too obvious to need elucidation. Many of his plots involve, at some level, a search for a home – the Dickens hero or heroine has, typically, like little Paul, 'taken life unfurnished' and is waiting for the upholsterer (*D&S* ch11 p215) – but of all the novels none broods upon the nature of Home more persistently than *Dombey & Son*.

Paul Dombey's homelessness is a psychological rather than a social condition, and generally, throughout the novel, the emphasis is upon the connections between home and character. They are linked in the chapter title, 'A Bird's-eye Glimpse of Miss Tox's Dwelling-place; and also of the state of Miss Tox's Affections', and it is not only her house that is placed by this description: '... a poor relation of the great street round the corner ... in the dullest of No-Thoroughfares, rendered anxious and haggard by distant double-knocks'. (*D&S* ch7 p143)

Dominating the whole book is the contrast between the Dombey mansion – the 'terrible dream' from which Florence flees (*D&S* ch49 p778) – and the Wooden Midshipman's shop, where she finds refuge. In between is a gamut of different homes, good and bad, rich and poor. Apart from those occupied and visited by the characters, there are other homes which we just see from the outside: the derelict house opposite Dombey's, which Florence sees transformed and brought to life by the widower and his rosy children, and the 'wretched rooms' which we see into

1 *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts*, letters 40 & 52, 26th May 1846 and 28th October 1847.

from the railway, 'where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes'. (*D&S* ch20 p355)

Home and character

One cannot miss the relation between the character of the house and that of its inhabitants, but the basis on which it rests is less easy to define. Partly it is a matter of the sheer *léger-de-main* of fine writing. Mrs Pipchin and her house are introduced in two paragraphs (*D&S* ch8 p160) which complement each other so perfectly that we are convinced that the house itself is as dark as Mrs Pipchin's black bombazeen, 'of such a lustreless, deep, dead, sombre shade, that gas itself couldn't light her up after dark', and that 'not naturally ... fresh-smelling' applies as much to Mrs Pipchin as it does to the house. The assertiveness of Dr Blimber's 'mighty fine house fronting the sea' picks up the references to the Doctor's manner when he has 'posed a boy'. (*D&S* ch11 p207)

Most of what Dickens says about John and Harriet Carker's home refers to the neighbourhood, a neighbourhood undergoing change – not the purposeful, invigorating change that the railway brings to Staggs's Gardens, but sluggish, aimless change that leaves it 'frowzy'. (*D&S* ch33 p557) This once pleasant countryside, blighted by the city's appetite for bricks and fuel and by unplanned and incomplete suburban building, is emblematic of John Carker's career, ruined by the temptations of the city and its unforgiving commercial morality. But the house itself resists the blight, as Harriet has resisted the social pressure to cast off her disgraced brother. The account of her housekeeping is dense with moral terms as Dickens insists upon the nobility of her unheroic heroism and dull domestic virtue, but there is little actual description of the home. In James Carker's case, however, we are assured that his character has determined his home's look and feel.

He has made 'costly alterations' in the old family house. The description of the house in Norwood is not detailed in the sense that we can see the grain in the furniture or the weave of the costly drapery. It is rather an enumeration of the

apparently significant objects with which James has chosen to surround himself. There is something of desperation in the way Dickens calls up one emblematic object after another to suggest James's character, and concludes that there is 'something in the general air that is not well'. (*D&S* ch33 p555) The uncertainty of aim in this account is admitted by Dickens, who expresses his sense of something wrong in a series of questions. The description of the 'opulence of comfort', is loaded with vague disapproval. For example, what does it mean to say that the cushions are 'too soft'? (*D&S* ch33 p554) What is the connection between that and a refined taste in books and pictures and a penchant for games of chance and skill? Dickens regards any stick as good enough to beat his villain with. Unless James spends his whole off-duty life snarling to himself, we must assume that he reads his books and thinks about his paintings. Would he have something interesting to say about Balzac or the latest Academy exhibition, or are his books and pictures pornography pure and simple? While there is no doubt that Carker is a villain, it is not clear what sort of villain he is – a resentful intellectual out to take a complicated revenge upon a commercial world that has humiliated him, or a treacherous businessman with unsavoury sexual tastes?

Dickens invokes the concept of hypocrisy in his account of psychological complexities that baffle him.

> Is it that the completeness and the beauty of the place are here and there belied by an affectation of humility, in some unimportant and inexpensive regard, which is as false as the face of the too truly painted portrait hanging yonder, or its original at breakfast in his easy chair below it?
>
> (*D&S* ch33 p554)

This is a disappointing sentence. What promises to be an explanation collapses into the irritatingly imprecise *in some unimportant and inexpensive regard*, and the sentence ends with an irrelevant comparison between Carker and his portrait. The only substantial point we can pick up is that Carker feigns humility, which we already know from seeing how he fawns on Dombey, flatters and manipulates him.

The final explanation offered is vague enough, but has a suggestive vagueness:

> Or is it that, with the daily breath of that original and master of all here, there issues forth some subtle portion of himself, which gives a vague expression of himself to

everything about him?

(*D&S* ch33 p554)

A person's moral character, this suggests, is revealed in his surroundings in ways too subtle to describe by accumulation of detail or analysis of cause and effect, but which can be picked up by those who are sensitive to what is in the general air. Florence and Edith shudder at his hidden menace. Captain Cuttle and Rob the Grinder encounter it more nakedly. But not everyone sees him for what he is. Loathing for Carker is so assiduously encouraged by the narrative, every detail, from his teeth to the white legs of his horse, is invested with such a strong sinister charge, that it is hard to believe that anyone could have been taken in by his pretended humility and his smile.[2] It is not surprising that it takes the catastrophe of the elopement to bring home to the dim-witted Cousin Feenix that the 'man with white teeth' is an 'infernal scoundrel', but how is it that he manages to leave a 'favourable impression' on Sir Barnet and Lady Skettles? (*D&S* ch61 p969 & ch24 p429) The suggestion that a 'subtle portion' of Carker's true nature makes itself visible in his home and everything about him needs to be read alongside the rhetorical passage later in the book in which the narrator deplores the invisibility of 'moral pestilence' and the blindness of a 'Christian People' to 'the thick and sullen air where Vice and Fever propagate together'. (*D&S* ch47 p738) Ordinarily good people like the Skettleses do not see the evil of a man like Carker expressed in 'everything about him'.

The Dombey mansion

Homes need to be cleaned, ornamented and repaired. There is Miss Tox's dusting, and Mrs MacStinger's mopping and scrubbing. The whole neighbourhood of the Toodles's house is transformed by the onslaught of the railway. Dr Blimber puts his house in thorough repair before handing it on to his son-in-law. Even Good Mrs Brown's home shows signs of cleanliness and order, made in a 'reckless, gipsy

[2] Dickens is particularly irritated by Carker on horseback. When Florence shudders, and Barnet Skettles suggests that somebody is passing over her grave, 'Mr Carker ... bowed, and disappeared, as if he rode off to the churchyard straight, to do it.' (*D&S* ch24 p429) The mere fact that he is a skilful rider, picking 'his dainty way', seems to make his gloating over the doomed marriage appear more devilish. (*D&S* ch31 p533)

way, that might have connected them at a glance with [Alice].'[3] (*D&S* ch52 p817) Only the moribund Feenix house in Brook Street undergoes no renovation or improvement.

The most extensive renovations are those carried out on the Dombey mansion at the time of the wedding. There is pathos in the change, in the shock that Florence receives on coming home, looking for peace and tranquillity, only to find 'her mother's picture ... gone ... and on the mark where it had been, ... scrawled in chalk, "this room in panel. Green and gold."' (*D&S* ch28 p483) But for all Florence's sadness, and for all the moralist's irony on the wallpaper roses with their thorns and the new altar being raised to the Household Gods (*D&S* ch30 p503; ch35 p580), Dickens cannot restrain his sheer enjoyment of the bustle and activity of the building work, the labyrinths of scaffolding and a 'whole Olympus of plumbers and glaziers ... reclining in various attitudes, on the skylight'. (*D&S* ch28 p483) When Florence goes up to Paul's old room, there is 'a dark giant of a man with a pipe in his mouth, and his head tied up in a pocket-handkerchief ... staring in at the window'. (*D&S* ch28 p483) The main point here is to convey Florence's sense of shock, but this vividly realised presence also forces us, just for a moment, to see the characters and scenes of the story through other eyes.

Dickens's telling image for Paul's sense of not belonging to the world, that it is as if 'he had taken life unfurnished, and the upholsterer were never coming' (*D&S* ch11 p215), is picked up in a highly comic and suggestive way in an incident that occurs when all the work is done:

> The upholsterer's foreman, who has left his hat, with a pocket-handkerchief in it, both smelling strongly of varnish, under a chair in the hall, lurks about the house, gazing upwards at the cornices, and downward at the carpets, and occasionally, in a silent transport of enjoyment, taking a rule out of his pocket, and skirmishingly measuring expensive objects, with unutterable feelings.
>
> (*D&S* ch35 p580)

It is ironical that the upholstery for Paul's life, in the shape of a new Mamma, arrives too late – but the richness of the conceit goes further than this. The lurking

---

[3] It is hard to know just what this means, but it is presumably a way of reminding us that the improvements have been paid for by Alice's earnings as a prostitute.

figure lends resonance to the banal gossip of the servants, who are touched with something of the same delusion as their master. The upholsterer, with his ruler, hat and handkerchief, and his smell, belongs to our world, and he feels what we might feel, an undefined pleasure in the presence of expensive things. Dickens does not say how much of the upholsterer's pleasure comes from thinking what he will be paid, and how much is simple disinterested enjoyment of contact with so much money.

Why does Dombey renovate his home in this extraordinary way? The giant with the pipe looking in at the windows must be very distasteful to a man so easily offended by contact with his inferiors. The builders are not self-effacing like domestic servants, who can be made to give up even their names. The house is cold because Dombey is cold, and is dark and empty in keeping with his mood. The connection between them is so intimate that it is as though the builders are operating on Dombey himself. There is an obvious explanation – it is part of his wedding bargain with Edith. But that only enlarges the question into: Why does he marry Edith?

Again there is an obvious answer – he wants a son, and Edith is the first eligible woman he meets. Edith awakens in him a sense of his emotional needs, a matter of sexual desire, loneliness, and a longing for that deep satisfaction that he expects to feel in having a son. We see something of his state of mind in the account of his railway journey to Leamington, a journey which begins with his indignant rejection of Mr Toodle's human sympathy, and goes on through 'a wilderness of blighted plans and gnawing jealousies' with Death remorselessly at the end of every paragraph. (*D&S* ch20 p354) Edith, bending over her harp, suggests 'some distant music of his own, that tamed the monster of the iron road, and made it less inexorable'. (*D&S ch21* p371) We are not told to what extent Dombey's choice of Edith is due to her sexual charms, any more than we are told how much of his anger against her during their marriage is due to her frustration of his sexual and dynastic demands. Dombey no more understands what is going on than he knows

the strain she is playing. His business associates are right when they mutter at the housewarming that it is a bad bargain, 'a weak thing in Dombey, and he'd live to repent it'. (*D&S* ch36 p602)

It is a mistake to assume that Dombey is merely trapped into the marriage by Mrs Skewton and the Major, although undoubtedly they do exploit his emotional prostration following Paul's death. There is a rationale of sorts behind his choice. Edith is right when she says that he has 'considered of his bargain; ... thinks that it will suit him, and may be had sufficiently cheap', and that he 'makes the purchase of his own will, and with his own sense of its worth, and the power of his money'. (*D&S* ch27 pp472 & 474) He values Edith's pride as an addition to his own greatness (*D&S* ch40 p648). And then there is the Feenix 'connexion'. His sister sees that the marriage to 'people of condition' involves a step up and Dombey himself is conscious of moving into a new world. (*D&S* ch29 p499) The Major declares himself to be honoured by his connexion with Dombey:

> ... the instinctive recognition of such a truth by the Major, and his plain avowal of it, were very agreeable. ... It was an assurance to him that his power extended beyond his own immediate sphere; and that the Major, as an officer and a gentleman, had no less becoming a sense of it, than the beadle of the Royal Exchange.
>
> (*D&S* ch20 p345)

Dombey is making the transition from the world of the solid merchant to that of the financier, from a world of traditional mercantile values, to the world of social prestige, parliamentary influence and other supposed guarantees of respectability less tangible than money in the bank. Like the respectable men that I shall discuss in a later chapter, Dombey is seeking the collaboration of officers and gentlemen, and the social underwriting of the aristocracy. His two investments, in Edith and in the renovation of his house, have a clear business purpose, as we see when he complains of Edith's failure to receive his friends with deference. (*D&S* ch36 p603) She and her aristocratic connexions were supposed to help him acquire influence in the business world in a new way. Dombey has been referred to as a representative of the 'new financial tycoons'.[4] This is not true at the outset. He is backward-looking, the third generation of Dombey and Son. The bust of Pitt in his room links

[4] Michael Goldberg, *Carlyle and Dickens* (Athens Ga, 1972) ch4 p45.

him with the early days of the century. His vision of the greatness of the firm, absurd and exaggerated though it is, has an old-fashioned sound to it. It is all about ships and cargoes and real money. To use a distinction that Dickens makes in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dombey starts off as a solid Podsnap, but becomes a Veneering – the great housewarming party, where Mr Dombey's list and Mrs Dombey's list face each other with hostility, is a very Veneering-like occasion.

The Wooden Midshipman

The Wooden Midshipman's shop is everything that the Dombey house is not – personal, convivial, vulnerable. But if the shop stands in some way for an ideal of the home, it is striking that it is an ideal that distinguishes the home from the family. The little band who, at one time or another, find refuge in the shop – Walter and his uncle, Captain Cuttle, Florence, Toots and Susan Nipper, and, one might add, Rob the Grinder and Diogenes the dog – are not a family group. They are, apart from Rob, a voluntary association, a domesticated Pickwick Club, bound by good fellowship rather than by the heavy sanctions of nature and convention that create a family unit. The distinction between home and family is important if the home is to become a good model for wider social action, and it is an idea that Dickens returns to. Both Mr Peggotty and John Jarndyce bring together orphans to live as brother and sister, with a view to their eventually becoming man and wife. The intention behind the non-familial home is, in all three cases, the re-establishment of the family unit proper. In *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* there are tensions undreamt of in the Midshipman's shop, and of the three young couples it is only Walter and Florence who go on to create a successful family home.

The shop is a haven from the rough world outside. Not that it isn't visited by misfortune, but it has a power to repel it. Brogley the broker is disarmed by this magic. (*D&S* ch9 p185) The home is a haven and a refuge, and must be guarded against attack. We can judge the home by what it excludes. Captain Cuttle's fortifications parody Dombey's idea of shutting out the world with 'a double door of gold'. The Captain regards Mrs MacStinger as an aggressor and a threat,

whereas what Dombey sees as a threat is the impertinent sympathy of Toodles, or Captain Cuttle's 'mighty nosegay'. (*D&S* ch25 p438; ch20 p353; ch16 p292) Rob the Grinder is expelled from the Midshipman, while those expelled from the Dombey circle are Polly, Miss Tox, Susan and Florence.

The Midshipman's insulation from the world is evident above all in the futility of most of the activities of its inhabitants. Captain Cuttle is a man who lives entirely in his imagination, pursued by imaginary fears, pursuing imaginary goals, hemmed in by imaginary duties – although, interestingly, he seems not to know what imagination is, believing implicitly that all books are true. (*D&S* ch39 p629) He is a man who is wrong about almost everything, the supreme illustration of the idea, which will arise in the discussion of *Hard Times*, that it is better to be wrong. It is because Dickens conveys the strength of this imagination that we need not cringe at the Captain's idolatry of Florence, and the conversion of the dressing table in her room into

> a species of altar, on which he set forth two silver teaspoons, a flower-pot, a telescope, his celebrated watch, a pocket-comb, and a song-book, as a small collection of rarities, that made a choice appearance.
>
> (*D&S* ch48 p764)

There is no army of workmen as in Dombey's house, no expensive and artistic taste as in Carker's, only the efforts of a simple and ludicrous man making 'the best arrangement ... that his imagination and his means suggested'. (*D&S* ch48 p764) Among other things, what Dickens is asserting in the character of Captain Cuttle is that the imagination is an essential part of the life of the humble and inarticulate.

The Wooden Midshipman and all that belongs to it are heavy with meaning. In a way it is obvious what they mean – they stand for all the values which are denied in the Dombey house. But there is something deeply unsatisfying about an account which takes a scene that is as vividly and wittily and sharply described as the Captain's 'altar' and generalises it into kindness, good feeling and generosity. It is all these things, of course, but we feel that there must be a better word for precisely this sort of kindness, good feeling and generosity. As we stammer, Toots-like, looking for this better word, we might conclude that after all the meaning is more

clearly conveyed by the teaspoons, watch and telescope themselves than by any larger abstractions. Certainly, Dickens's own moments of moralising on the Captain's character add little to our understanding.[5]

Of all the emblems with which Walter, his uncle and the Captain surround themselves, none is more powerful than the last bottle of Madeira. Its talismanic quality is recognised by Uncle Sol:

> You shall drink the other bottle, Wally, ... when you come to good fortune ...
>
> That shall be opened when Walter comes home again.
>
> (*D&S*ch4 p93 & ch29 p340)

The bottle has 'had its cruising days, and known its dangers of the deep,' and there is a whole litany of shipwreck, horror and self-sacrifice associated with it. (*D&S* ch29 p344 & ch4 pp95f) When in the final chapter Mr Dombey tastes the wine and acknowledges its quality it is as though he is acknowledging all the values of the Wooden Midshipman.

There is an undeniable air of wishful thinking about this ending. The Wooden Midshipman is a little world insulated from economic realities, with Walter acting out a Dick Whittington fairy-tale, but there is more to the real world than economics.

> In the Baltic Sea, in the dead of night; five-and-twenty minutes past twelve when the captain's watch stopped in his pocket; he lying dead against the main-mast – on the fourteenth of February, seventeen forty-nine. ... Then there were five hundred casks of such wine aboard; and all hands (except the first mate, first lieutenant, two seamen, and a lady, in a leaky boat) going to work to stave the casks, got drunk and died drunk, singing 'Rule Britannia', when she settled and went down, and ending with one awful scream in chorus.
>
> (*D&S* ch4 p95)

This is romantic stuff but it suggests a more realistic understanding of the elements than Mr Dombey's view that rivers and seas are formed to float his ships. (*D&S* ch1 p50)

---

5 For example: 'To see the Captain lift her on the sofa, and cover her with his coat, would have been worth a hundred state sights...' (*D&S* ch48 p762)

Happy housekeepers

The elevation of the idea of the home is connected with the woman question, being rightly seen as part of the propaganda for the 'two spheres' view of life, and for the confinement of women to the domestic sphere. This is not an entirely negative thing. By emphasising the importance and difficulty of the domestic role, as Ruskin does in *Sesame and Lilies*, the two spheres argument pleads eloquently for women's equal access to education and knowledge. The view of the home as a centre from which the domestic virtues and skills of women should radiate outwards can appear favourable to a greater role for women in society. If in the end such ideas fail as a strategy for advancing women's rights and role, one of the reasons is that writers within the two spheres tradition found it difficult to put together a convincing job-description for the intelligent woman in the home. For example, the character of Ursula in *John Halifax, Gentleman* represents a determined attempt to show marriage as an equal partnership and to give substance to the domestic role. If such a patient catalogue of the activities of a mature housewife fails, in the end, to make the two spheres view convincing, it is not surprising that Dickens's hurried snapshots of adolescent girls fussing round their menfolk also fail.

Florence sees that, in the house opposite, the eldest daughter, a 'happy little house-keeper', has become a companion to her widowed father, and she longs to play the same part towards her own father. (*D&S* ch18 p319) Superficially, the girl's domestic companionship consists of nothing more than meeting her father when he returns from his work, and making his tea after dinner. Of course there is much more to the relationship than this – the girl evidently reminds the father of his dead wife – but so far as action is concerned Dickens mentions nothing more demanding than making the tea. Florence is an intelligent young woman, who is able to teach herself Paul's lessons, but we get no sense of how the domestic role is going to make use of her intelligence. When she does find a home in which to become a 'happy little housekeeper', we see her sweeping the hearth and providing the Captain with his pipe and drink. (*D&S* ch49 p775) There is no suggestion how

an intelligent housewife should spend her time. Of course, the significance of these acts in their context is much greater than their triviality would suggest. They are acts of daughterly affection such as those which Mr Dombey spurned as blindly as he spurned the Captain's spoons. If this weight of significance does not move us as we are moved by the Captain's silverware, it is no doubt because Florence as a character is less powerfully realised than the Captain.

The limited domestic role was, of course, what middle-class girls were bred for. Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*, published in the year that *Dombey & Son* was completed, contains a plea to rethink the upbringing of girls and broaden the range of action open to women. One of the heroines is a girl who, very much like Florence, longs for affection. Living in what her undemonstrative husband reminds us repeatedly is an industrial country, she finds no-one to respond to her capacity for love, until she meets Conrad, an extreme adherent to the two spheres tradition who believes a woman should be a 'softened reflex' of her husband.[6] Jewsbury's attack is directed against both the materialism of an upbringing that ignores Alice's aspirations and the 'selfish sensualism' of those who would cultivate the mind and feelings of an Alice, but only in order to make her 'pleasant and graceful' in men's eyes.[7] Her novel ends on an uncertain note, however, because she seems to endorse the comment of her other heroine, Bianca the actress, that a woman, even if she does have a public life and public work, is dependent for happiness on finding an object of love 'endowed with a greater and nobler character than her own', and that in the end this does come down to finding a man for whom she is prepared to use her intelligence in arranging his breakfasts, dinners and servants.[8]

Jewsbury's book is relevant to a discussion of Florence Dombey in two ways. First it is striking that even a thoughtful critic of the prevailing views on women's role finds it hard to flesh out the domestic ideal in a way that convinces us that

---

6 *The Half Sisters* (1848; Oxford, 1994) II 2 p218.
7 *The Half Sisters* II 3 p226.
8 *The Half Sisters* II 27 p392.

Bianca is right to give up her vocation as actress when she marries. We might therefore forgive Dickens for the sketchiness of his representation of Florence's function as domestic angel at the Wooden Midshipman. More importantly, Jewsbury gives what it is hard not to think is a more plausible account of the effects of the sort of upbringing inflicted on both Alice and Florence, in which their yearning for affection is constantly rebuffed and suppressed. Alice is emotionally and intellectually stunted, and the effect of her upbringing persists throughout her short adult life, whereas Florence emerges unscathed. In her father's home she is shown as a repressed and withdrawn child, neurotically prone to tears, but at the Wooden Midshipman she emerges as fully capable of taking control of her life, even to the extent of taking the initiative in overcoming Walter's hesitation. The intense cruelty of her treatment by her father is measured by her tears – but the problem is not that she cries so readily, but that this seems to be the only effect. She divests herself of her neuroses as easily as Oliver Twist divests himself of the marks of the workhouse and Fagin's kitchen. There is in other Dickensian heroes, such as Esther, Amy and Pip, this same inborn power of fighting back against the oppressive environment, but what distinguishes these later heroes from Oliver and Florence is that we get more of a sense of a continuing emotional cost and inner struggle. With Oliver, and even with Florence, we have rather a feeling that Dickens is equivocating. He wants us to believe in the reality of the cruel treatment, but he also requires his hero to emerge unimpaired.[9]

Mr Dombey's motives

The sense of layers of incomprehensibility is strong throughout the book. We see it in the magic of the Wooden Midshipman, with the deeper mystery of the bottle of

---

[9] An extreme case of this equivocation is in the character of the Marchioness in the *Old Curiosity Shop* who begins as a victim of unspeakable abuse and neglect, but ends married, and suitably married, to the young gentleman Dick Swiveller. The equivocation, amounting in this case to evasiveness, of the text is strikingly illustrated by Browne's two representations of the Marchioness playing cards. The first (1840) shows her as stunted, prematurely aged, wearing a grotesque hat, comically engrossed in the cards, while in the second (1848) she appears as a round-armed, dainty young woman looking shyly at Dick rather than her cards, and with nothing to hint at her degrading circumstances beyond the fact of having taken off one of her slippers. (See Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz* (London, 1978) illustrations 34 & 35.)

Madeira festooned with cobwebs in the cellar. Looking back after twenty years, in the preface to the 1867 edition, Dickens claims to have been doing something difficult and unusual in this book, especially in the portrayal of Mr Dombey.

> I make so bold as to believe that the faculty (or the habit) of correctly observing the characters of men, is a rare one. ...The two commonest mistakes ... are, the confounding of shyness with arrogance – a very common mistake indeed – and the not understanding that an obstinate nature exists in a perpetual struggle with itself.
>
> Mr Dombey undergoes no violent change, either in this book, or in real life.[10] A sense of his injustice is within him, all along. The more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is. Internal shame and external circumstances may bring the contest to a close in a week, or a day; but, it has been a contest for years, and is only fought out after a long balance of victory.
>
> (Preface to *D&S*, 1867)

In his descriptions of this perpetual struggle Dickens is straining to extend the range of what can be expressed about the workings of the mind.

For this purpose, he uses a number of devices. In 'his buttoned coat, his white cravat, his heavy gold watch-chain, and his creaking boots' (*D&S* ch5 p109), Dombey can hardly express the depth of his feeling in the melodramatic language of heaving bosom, dilating nostril and rushing blood. Throughout the scene where he confronts Edith over her extravagance, her diamonds rise and fall, her bosom throbs, her colour changes from white to red, and her look darkens, and this body imagery is borrowed to convey the strength not of her emotions only, but of his too: 'His insolence of self-importance dilated ... swollen ... it became too mighty for his breast, and burst all bounds.' (*D&S* ch40 p652) The one physiological sign of emotion which is ascribed to Dombey himself at various times, a darkening look ('a darkness gathered on his face, exceeding any that the night could cast, and rested there.' (*D&S* ch35 p588)) is a significant exception, since its physiological basis is

---

[10] This denial is interesting in view of Steven Marcus's persuasive account of the novel as offering 'a comprehensive, unified presentation of social life by depicting how an abstract principle conditions all experience. That principle is change.' (*Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey* (London, 1965) ch8 p298) The idea of *change* is ambiguous enough to fudge any apparent contradiction. The book is full of perceptions of change, such as the transformation of Staggs's Gardens or the renovation of the Dombey mansion, but it is misleading to build them into an abstract principle. The vivid detail, such as 'this room in panel. Green and gold', is always what Dickens sees and what, in the end, he makes us remember.

very slight in comparison with the huge moral interpretation which is placed upon it.

On the journey to Leamington we see the passing scene through Dombey's eyes, and it is coloured by his despairing mood – by what Barbara Hardy calls 'the selectivity of passion'.[11] The railway journey does more than render Dombey's passion in terms of external movement and drama. It contributes to the sense of destiny, to the sense that Dombey is being hurried to an unknown end by forces beyond himself. The 'remorseless ... indomitable monster, Death! ... shrieking, roaring, rattling through the purple distance' is a harsh parody of Paul's river running to the sea, towards the distant place on the horizon. (*D&S* ch20 p355, ch16 p297 & ch8 p171)

Dickens does not commit himself to an idea of external destiny controlling Dombey's actions and fate. When Florence creeps down to embrace her sleeping father the writing is awkward and portentous –

> Awake, unkind father! Awake, now, sullen man! ... Awake, doomed man, while she is near! ... When that time [ie death] should come, it would not be the heavier for him for this that she was going to do; and it might fall something lighter upon her.
> (*D&S* ch43 p698)

Unkind, *sullen* and *doomed* are terms that do not go easily together, suggesting in turn moral judgement, psychological diagnosis and a sense of predestination. It is a relief when Dickens gives up the attempt to reconcile by rhetoric these irreconcilable categories, and gives us instead a piece of suggestive observation:

> The wind was blowing drearily. The lamps looked pale, and shook as if they were cold. There was a distant glimmer of something that was not quite darkness, rather than of light, in the sky; and foreboding night was shivering and restless, as the dying are who make a troubled end.
> (*D&S* ch43 p699)

Here the fanciful notions that the lamps feel the cold and that the night has a bad conscience bring us close to the mysterious world beneath the surface of things more effectively than the declamations of the earlier passage.

---

11 *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London, 1985) ch2 p52.

The depth of Dombey's moral failure is marked by his inability to participate adequately in the scenes around Paul's deathbed; and his alienation from Florence is emphasised by his failure to build up with her a stock of shared experience and shared memory.[12] When Edith plays the song that Florence used to sing to Paul, he doesn't recognise it. (*D&S* ch21 p371) And what he does remember of their life together fails to have the appropriate softening effect:

> The last time he had watched her, from the same place, winding up those stairs, she had had her brother in her arms. It did not move his heart towards her now, it steeled it: but he went into his room, and locked his door, and sat down in his chair, and cried for his lost boy.
>
> (*D&S* ch18 p329)

This comes immediately after Florence's appeal to him, his rejection of it, her 'prolonged low cry,' and the repeated invocation: 'Let him remember it in that room, years to come.' The connection with his past that he fails to make now, and which is systematically obscured over the years by his sullen pride, he will eventually make, after his downfall, when he remembers this moment 'in agony, in sorrow, in remorse, in despair!' (*D&S* ch59 p934) The connection between these two moments, brought home to Dombey only at the end, has been recognised all along by the elements: 'The rain that falls upon the roof: the wind that mourns outside the door: may have foreknowledge in their melancholy sound.' (*D&S* ch18 p329 & ch59 p934) In this idea of foreknowledge there is, once more, an implication of predestination, but the point is less to suggest that Dombey is in the grip of external fates, than to emphasise his ignorance, his failure to recognise what is significant in his own life.

The wind and rain, the darkness, the sense of destiny, the unrecognised and unacknowledged music, all indicate a world of feeling with which Dombey has as

---

[12] An essential element in Dickens's moral outlook is the obligation to remember. It is asserted piously and sententiously in *Nicholas Nickleby* – 'Memory, however sad, is the best and purest link between this world and a better.' (*NN* ch6 p129) – and with great delicacy in *Great Expectations*, when Pip softens his memory of his sister, as

> the very breath of the beans and clover whispered to my heart that the day must come when it would be well for my memory that others walking in the sunshine should be softened as they thought of me.
>
> (*GE* ch35 p298)

Both in *Nicholas Nickleby* and in *Great Expectations* the role of memory is strongly associated with ideas of death.

little contact as he has with the life of the people around him – the warm, life-affirming world of the Toodles family, or the horrifying world of the slums which he glimpses for the first time as he travels on the train. We sense the existence in (and, as it were, around) Dombey of this deep and turbulent emotion, but it is hard to say precisely and adequately what it is that he feels, what it is that drives him. Every answer raises new questions. He loves his son and weeps over his loss – but then how can a man who will not allow himself to feel for any other person make this one fatal exception? How is it that Dombey feels so passionately the loss of one child and yet can contemplate coldly the thought of losing the other? Like Paul listening to the waves, we strain to hear the words, but, like the upholsterer's, Dombey's feelings are unutterable.

Dickens tries to fit words to Dombey's feelings. To no other character's emotions and motives does he devote more words and speculation. The discussions of motive sometimes drift towards wordy moralising, but what redeems them, what makes them exciting, is our sense that Dickens is striving for the impossible, straining to articulate an unconscious mind. This, for example, is Dombey recalling the scene of his first wife's death:

> Unable to exclude these things from his remembrance, or to keep his mind free from such imperfect shapes of the meaning with which they were fraught, as were able to make themselves visible to him through the mist of his pride, his previous feeling of indifference towards little Florence changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind. Young as she was, and possessing in any eyes but his (and perhaps in his too) even more than the usual amount of childish simplicity and confidence, he almost felt as if she watched and distrusted him. As if she held the clue to something secret in his breast, of the nature of which he was hardly informed himself. As if she had an innate knowledge of one jarring and discordant string within him, and her very breath could sound it.
>
> (*D&S* ch3 pp83f)

Here are symptoms of some of Dickens's weakest writing – the telling image of *imperfect shapes of meaning* muffled by the uncertain syntax of the first sentence, the speculative parenthesis and the repeated hypothesising.[13] It is remarkably indirect – the narrator speculating about Dombey's speculations about what Florence might know (but could not possibly articulate) about what is going on in his heart. But in

[13] When Dickens uses *as if* (one of his most characteristic devices) it is usually to introduce a comic or suggestive comparison, not to raise speculative hypotheses such as we have here. See for example the passage quoted above on page 109 footnote 2.

this context such writing seems appropriate. There is a comparable indirectness in the following passage, where Florence, not long after Paul's death, is frightened by her father's look:

> The old indifference and cold restraint had given place to something: what, she never thought and did not dare to think, and yet she felt it in its force, and knew it well without a name ...
>
> Did he see before him the successful rival of his son, in health and life? Did he look upon his own successful rival in that son's affection? Did a mad jealousy and withered pride, poison sweet remembrances that should have endeared and made her precious to him? Could it be possible that it was gall to him to look upon her in her beauty and her promise: thinking of his infant boy!
>
> Florence had no such thoughts. But love is quick to know when it is spurned and hopeless: and hope died out of hers, as she stood looking in her father's face.
>
> (*D&S* ch18 p328)

There is bathos in *Florence had no such thoughts*, but on the whole the writing here has urgency, as Dickens tries to find ways of conveying the *somethings* which have force in our lives, but no name.

Dombey's business

The fact that Dombey is a wealthy man plays only a subordinate part in these accounts of his motive. There are many hints thrown out in the opening chapters of the book which lend colour to the idea that it is to be read as an attack upon a society, represented by Dombey, that is obsessed with money. But then, as the story develops, we find that a different theme occupies more and more the centre of the stage – we feel, like Miss Tox, that Dombey and Son is a daughter after all (*D&S* ch59 p941 & ch16 p298), and what we thought was to be a story about a commercial house, turns out to be a story of a father's failed relationship with his daughter. There is no direct link between these themes. We cannot say, for instance, that Dombey fails in his relationship with Florence because he is too obsessed with money, because he spends too much time in getting money, or because he sacrifices her to his business or uses her as a means to make money. There are some links, of course. His original failure to value Florence is due to his obsession with carrying on the firm. His conviction that he can buy people (Polly, Edith, Good Mrs Brown) plainly has much to do with his failure to develop natural human relationships,

and generally the position of dominance that his money has given him has engendered the sullen pride which is his undoing. The idea of rivalry, which recurs in his thoughts about Florence, is an obvious carry-over from the commercial world into private life. But despite these strong indirect connections, it is hard to feel that money is an essential ingredient in Dombey's failure to love his daughter.

We tend to think that the evil effect of money is primarily due to its corrupting influence as a motive: people go wrong because they want to get money. Dickens is unwilling to accept the motiveless evil of a villain such as Squeers or John Chester, and so invents financial motives for them. In *Dombey & Son* it is different. James Carker needs money to finance his vices, and when he makes a fortune (legally, as Morfin assures Harriet (*D&S* ch53 p843)) he plans to spend it on a life of luxury and ease. Vice and poverty, not the love of money itself, are the sources of the two criminal acts in the novel, John Carker's embezzlement and Mrs Brown's theft. Where economic wrongs are committed, they are committed against the House of Dombey, but if we consider the overall balance, the House of Dombey appears as the principal wrong-doer, which suggests that while the conventional money motive is present in the book, it is weak when compared with other sources of evil.

Edith, in the world's view and in her own, marries for money, but it is hard to see money as a motivating force. Indeed she seems to lack any motive beyond a desire to escape from an intolerable situation. It is economic dependence, that defines her situation and renders it intolerable, but this does not make it a motive that she strongly feels – not as Bella Wilfer will feel it in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dombey's wealth is her excuse, rather than her motive, for marriage, as though she feels, like the Veneerings' guest, that she 'may do anything lawful for money, but for no money – bosh!' (*OMF* IV 17 p891) Nor is her extravagance after her marriage a sign that she married in order to get the means to be extravagant. The intention behind her extravagance is rather to punish Dombey and show her indifference to him, and above all to punish herself. The 'most innocent allusion to the power of his riches degraded her anew, sunk her deeper in her own respect, and made the

blight and waste within her more complete' (*D&S* ch35 p584), but by her extravagance she enforces more and more the allusion to the power of his riches, and so degrades herself. She is also turning his money into a weapon against him – he is embarrassed and awkward amongst the 'voluptuous glitter' with which she has surrounded herself. (*D&S* ch40 p651)

The complex of aggression towards herself and towards Dombey, and its connection with both money and sex, can be seen if we follow what she does with her white arms in the course of their great argument:

> ... folding her white arms, sparkling with gold and gems, upon her swelling breast ...
>
> ... turning a bracelet round and round upon her arm; not winding it about with a light womanly touch, but pressing and dragging it over the smooth skin, until the white limb showed a bar of red.
>
> ... The hand that had so pressed the bracelet was laid heavily upon her breast ...
>
> ... raising the hand she pressed upon her bosom, and heavily returning it ...
>
> Throughout she had spoken in a low plain voice, that neither rose nor fell; ceasing, she dropped the hand with which she had enforced herself to be so passionless and distinct ...
>
> ... pointing with an imperious hand towards the door.
>
> (*D&S* ch40 pp650-656)

The association of ideas here is taken a step further when we learn that for Edith, as for Paul, white arms are a symbol of death, beckoning 'in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away'. (*D&S* ch41 p673)

The evil Dombey does lies not in what he does for the sake of money, but in what he does with the money when he has it, and in what his money does to him. His money makes him proud and he uses it to sustain his pride. His pride has numerous strands. His exclusiveness is the most obvious – in Leavis's phrase 'the reinforced spirit of class, with its cold, brutal and extreme repudiation of what Lawrence calls "blood-togetherness"'.[14] When coldness and money fail to keep intrusive humanity at bay, his pride turns to anger and, in the extreme case, to violence. There is a sort of strength in this pride, which Dickens is willing to appreciate. It 'shows well', Morfin says, in his behaviour towards his creditors.

[14] *Dickens the Novelist* ch1 p28.

(*D&S* ch58 p914) Dombey's despair and humiliation do not reduce him quite as far as Carker is reduced, to 'imbecile discomfiture and rage' (*D&S* ch55 p870) – a moral superiority demonstrated as the two men confront each other across the railway track.

Behind the arrogance of wealth and power are weaker aspects of Dombey's pride. He is utterly dependent on others, not only in ways that are merely human, as in his dependence on Polly, but also in ways that derive specifically from his exclusiveness. Above all it is Carker who has made himself an indispensable buffer between his master and rude reality. But Dombey also depends upon his sister, making his relationship with her a graceless parody of Paul and Florence: 'Louisa, my dear, arrange with Richards about money,' he says, much as Paul says, 'There are some creatures ... I forget their names, but Florence knows ...' (*D&S* ch2 p68 & ch12 p216)

If we want to see Dombey not just as a proud man, but as a proud man of a particular class, the most interesting element in his pride is his insecurity. Whereas a miser might bestow on money the passion that should be reserved for a beloved person, Dombey adopts towards the object of his human love the greedy, anxious possessiveness of the miser. (*D&S* ch2 p71) His absurd fear that Polly will swap her own baby for Paul arises from a misapprehension as to the nature of parental love, and a fear that she will adopt towards him the ethics of the market, where self-interest rules and one takes what advantage one can. This is precisely the attitude he demands that she should adopt when he tells her that her relationship to the family is to be 'a question of wages, altogether'. (*D&S* ch2 p68) The employer insists that his relationship with his employee is a bargain of wages for services and nothing more; in moments of nightmare like this he sees the full consequence of such a relationship, sees the need for constant vigilance, and falls back on the comfortable thought that the servant will not be 'wicked enough' to take unscrupulous advantage.

Dombey's insecurity is evident too in his recurrent thoughts of Florence as a rival: 'Did he see before him the successful rival of his son, in health and life? Did he look upon his own successful rival in that son's affection?' (*D&S* ch18 p328) Again he is introducing the mentality of the market-place into personal relationships. Polly, Walter, Florence, Polly's husband – he sees everyone as 'a bidder against him' setting up 'some claim or other to a share in his dead boy'. (*D&S*ch20 p353) Love is a scarce commodity, with only a finite number of shares available, and Dombey wants to corner the market.

At some points it seems as though Dombey represents the hard money-making men of the time, a class-warrior in ruthless pursuit of profit:

> [Toodle] was a strong, loose, round-shouldered, shuffling, shaggy fellow, on whom his clothes sat negligently: with a good deal of hair and whisker, deepened in its natural tint, perhaps by smoke and coal-dust: hard knotty hands: and a square forehead, as coarse in grain as the bark of an oak. A thorough contrast in all respects, to Mr Dombey, who was one of those close-shaved close-cut moneyed gentlemen who are glossy and crisp like new bank-notes, and who seem to be artificially braced and tightened as by the stimulating action of golden showerbaths. (*D&S* ch2 p68)

There are, throughout the novel, enough references to class differences to keep alive the expectation that it is, like other novels of the 1840s, such as *Sibyl*, *Mary Barton* or *Shirley*, a novel about social conflict, whose resolution will point to a reconciliation between the classes. And sure enough, at the end, there is a chastened Mr Dombey taking wine with his social inferiors. But, if that is what we expect from the novel, we can hardly fail to feel disappointed. For one thing, Dombey (unlike Miss Tox) is drinking not with the genuinely proletarian Toodles, but with Sol Gills and Captain Cuttle, occupants of a social never-never land. Furthermore Sol's investments have turned out well, Walter is doing very nicely in trade and Dombey himself is living on James Carker's money, which even the prostitute Alice Marwood would not degrade herself by touching. Considerations such as this weaken the effect of the final scene as a parable of *social* reconciliation.

Dickens does not convey any strong sense of Dombey as an effective money-maker. Until the frenetic activity at the end, the only decisions connected with the firm that we see him take are dictated by personal considerations – the decisions to

lend money to Sol Gills and to send Walter to the West Indies. The effect of Paul's birth upon his business practice is noticed by his employees – it makes him keep a sharper eye on the books: whether this is merely commonplace prudence or debilitating obsessiveness, he is allowing personal considerations to determine his business practice. (*D&S* ch4 p99) When his personal affairs begin to absorb his interest, during his courtship of Edith, he becomes less attentive to business, giving ground to Carker which, one suspects, the confidential manager never relinquishes. (*D&S* ch26 p452)

The golden showerbaths have not only made Dombey proud and sullen, but also left him pretty incompetent as a man of affairs. His talk is never of the family, always of the firm, but what does the firm mean to him? He is impatient for Paul to grow up – Blimber's forcing academy is 'the way indeed to be Dombey and Son, and have money'. (*D&S* ch11 p208) Here the clause *and have money* has the sound of an afterthought, as though for Dombey the firm is more important even than the ostensible reason for its existence, money-making. This is the reality of the golden shower in which Dombey has been drenched since childhood:

> Coop any son or daughter of our mighty mother within narrow range, and bind the prisoner to one idea, and foster it by servile worship of it on the part of the few timid or designing people standing round, and what is Nature to the willing captive who has never risen up upon the wings of a free mind – drooping and useless soon – to see her in her comprehensive truth!
>
> (*D&S* ch47 p737)

Business, for Dombey, is not a rational pursuit of self-interest, but the acting out of an obsession, of his compulsion to 'be Dombey and Son', to fit himself to his 'one idea'.

His thoughts, on the birth of his long-awaited son, turn to his own father – not unnaturally, but there is something odd about the way he expresses it:

> '... I wish his grandfather were alive this day! There is some inconvenience in the necessity of writing Junior,' said Mr Dombey, making a fictitious autograph on his knee; 'but it is merely of a private and personal complexion. It doesn't enter into the correspondence of the House. *Its* signature remains the same.' And again he said 'Dombey and Son,' in exactly the same tone as before.
>
> (*D&S* ch1 p50)

What is behind this grotesque association of ideas? It shows Dombey's preoccupation with the forms of business practice, and it shows that he has a curious grasp of the details of his fantasy.[15] Perhaps the suggestion is that Dombey, for so long unable to produce a son, has felt a nagging inadequacy in comparison with his father. My idea of him is of a man playing at being his own father. (Dombey's characteristic position is standing in front of the fire. We are told that Carker has copied it from his chief – and we might ask, whom did Dombey himself copy it from, if not from his father.) There is no clear justification for this idea in the text, but at least we can say that his whole reaction to the birth of his son, with his extraordinary indifference to the suffering and death of his wife, is the reaction not just of an arrogant and callous man, but of a mentally unbalanced man.

What is money?

Or perhaps a very childish man. When Paul asks his question, What is money? Dombey is as hard up for an answer as Florence is when asked what the waves are saying. The answer he eventually gives is astonishingly puerile, hardly less so than Barnaby Rudge's fantasy about buying fine clothes and feathers and living at ease (*BR* ch45 p419):

> ... that money, though a very potent spirit, never to be disparaged on any account whatever, could not keep people alive whose time was come to die... But how that money caused us to be honoured, feared, respected, courted, and admired, and made us powerful and glorious in the eyes of all men; and how that it could, very often, keep off death, for a long time together.
>
> (*D&S* ch8 p153)

Not long after giving this answer, Dombey offers Paul a practical demonstration of what he means, when he allows Paul to feel the power of money:

> You see ... how powerful money is and how anxious people are to get it. Young Gay comes all this way to beg for money, and you, who are so grand and great, having got it, are going to let him have it, as a great favour and obligation.
>
> (*D&S* ch10 p197)

Of course, Dombey could be adapting his explanation to the infant mind of his son. It would be in keeping for him to do so, entirely plausible that he, who never gives

---

[15] It recalls another fantasist, Wackford Squeers: 'I never threshed a boy in a hackney-coach before. There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish too.' (*NN* ch38 p584)

a thought to the feelings and ideas of anyone else, should be assiduous in finding terms that his son can understand. But in fact there is nothing in the rest of Dombey's conversation and behaviour to suggest that he has himself progressed one step beyond this childish conception. Imagining that the great purpose of life is to be 'honoured, feared, respected, courted, and admired' is all of a piece with his fear of rivals competing with him for Paul's love.

So what is the answer to Paul's question? What is money? What is it good for? Sol Gills's investments enable him and Captain Cuttle to indulge their harmless fantasy of offering unwanted nautical instruments for sale; Walter's good fortune enables him to provide the home that Florence has never had; John Carker's inheritance from his brother enables him to redeem himself. Used for purposes such as these, money is an undoubted good. Used to buy power, to corrupt the poor or to finance a life of adultery and Mediterranean ease, money is an evil. Looked at coolly like this, money appears morally neutral, or perhaps we should rather say, morally ambivalent, good or bad depending on its use. Or perhaps we might say, with Good Mrs Brown, that the question whether money is good or bad is easily answered – for the poor it is quite plainly good, 'good to us in everything but not coming in heaps'. (*D&S* ch34 p575) However, we cannot always be so cool and so realistic. We might say that money, in itself, is neither good nor bad, but the fact is that money is very seldom simply money in itself. It comes with its emotional charge – whether the genial sentiment that attaches to Captain Cuttle's silverware, or the horror and anger that makes Alice throw Harriet's money back at her.

The happy ending in *Dombey & Son* is, in some ways, unsatisfactory. Walter's and Sol's money comes to them too suddenly, too conveniently, with too little trouble. This will seem less unsatisfactory if we take the money resolution to be of secondary importance. What matters is that Walter and Sol are found, are safe and are back together. That they are also affluent is largely a matter of literary convention.

The third component of the 'good money' that appears at the end of the novel is more interesting. It can hardly be said to have come easily, coming as it does as the result of James Carker's horrific death, and having to be transferred to Dombey by devious means. Here the figure of Mr Morfin is significant. He knows that benevolence cannot rely on chance meetings in the street, and that it is not as effortless as earlier benefactors like the Cheerybles make it seem. His motive for intervening in the Carkers' affairs, disgust at himself as a creature of habit, recalls Mark Tapley's determination to come out strong. He looks forward to John Jarndyce, the eccentric benefactor, as well as to Mr Wemmick who also is troubled by the conflicting pressures of business life and private conscience, and who also helps to fix up a secret benefaction. Morfin does not figure largely in the plot, but he introduces a theme which will be important in Dickens's later work: the emotional and practical obstacles in the way of using money well.

Chapter 4: Mr Micawber

The justification for the account of 'two interesting penitents' in chapter 61 of *David Copperfield* is that it tells us what has become of three villains from David's early life, Creakle, Heep and Littimer. There is something very plausible about their meeting up in prison, and about the way Creakle, who was unmerciful towards the boys in his care, and towards his own son, now shows great benevolence towards the two hypocrites. The incident also gives David the chance to polemicise against the 'separate' system of imprisonment, a topic that Dickens explores in a contemporary article in *Household Words*.[1] But whatever contribution the chapter makes to the debate on penal systems, it is sad to find Uriah used to make a political point.

The character is potentially much more interesting than that – one of a series of poor boys on the make that Dickens offers, from Noah Claypole and Sim Tappertit to Guppy, Bitzer and Charley Hexam. According to the ethics of social mobility Uriah's aim, to make himself indispensable to his employer and so rise to become a partner in the firm, is laudable, but because he is patently insincere, physically unattractive and the son of a sexton, David is utterly opposed to him. Opposition turns to hatred when David realises that marriage to Agnes is part of the plan, although that too is a time-honoured aspiration for the clever apprentice. David's opposition and hatred are fully established before he learns that Uriah is seeking to achieve his ends by blackmail and forgery. The question of how David should treat a strictly honest, though physically unattractive and socially ineligible Uriah Heep, is superseded by the much less interesting story of Uriah's crimes.

By making Uriah a criminal, Dickens distracts attention from his analysis of a significant element in normal, non-criminal, society. But the logic and moral of the book require that Uriah must be imprisoned, – and the same logic demands that Mr Micawber must be rewarded and set free.

---

1 'Pet Prisoners', *HW* 27th April 1850; *MP* pp222ff.

The Micawbers are regularly listed amongst the idealised or, more pejoratively, the flat or cardboard characters, the 'personified catchphrases' whom G. H. Lewes likens to brainless frogs with their single set of mechanical responses. There is, Lewes says, no attempt to represent Micawber as *un être ondoyant et divers*.[2] Lewes attributes the power such characters have over the reader's imagination to a hallucinatory quality in Dickens's vision. Orwell makes a similar point when he writes of the great Dickensian 'characters' as conforming to the childhood vision of people 'in one particular attitude, doing one particular thing'.[3]

Our first idea of Micawber is of an oversized chaotic figure, overflowing with words and aspirations, and there is an immediate translation of this idea into moral qualities such as openness and guilelessness. We think of him (particularly when he comes into conflict with Heep) as a big honest man caught in the toils of a puny, cunning creature, much as we think of Trooper George caught by Old Smallweed. The honesty of Micawber, and even of George, although it is vindicated in the end, is not entirely unambiguous from every point of view. Mrs Bagnet accuses George of no more than irresponsibility, and quickly withdraws even this charge, but we could use harsher words for his actions in jeopardising the Bagnet family savings. We could use still harsher words for Mr Micawber's irresponsibility in threatening Tommy Traddles's dreams of home-making, the plant pot and stand and the marble-topped table. (*BH* ch34 pp531ff; *DC* ch27 p466; ch34 p555) Our second thoughts, therefore, suggest a more sinister side: Orwell calls Micawber a 'cadging scoundrel'.[4] David, more mildly, refers to him as 'slippery', adding that despite his slipperiness, he retains 'a compassionate recollection ... of me as his boy lodger' – the equivalent of Mrs Micawber's motherly kiss when she suddenly sees David as a little lonely boy. (*DC* ch36 p600; ch12 p231) Grateful memory and instinctive

2 'Dickens in relation to criticism' *Fortnightly Review* February 1872; G H Ford & L Lane (edd.), *The Dickens Critics* (Ithaca, NY, 1961) p65.

3 'Charles Dickens' p134.

4 'Charles Dickens' p134.

human affection are key elements in Dickens's idea of goodness, the presence of which in the Micawbers accounts for their ultimate salvation.[5]

Saying that it is possible to see Mr Micawber's moral character in several different ways does not, of course, amount to saying that Dickens has given a psychologically detailed and convincing account of *un être ondoyant et divers*. For one thing, we are limiting our notion of psychological complexity to moral complexity. Dickens is certainly interested in Mr Micawber's moral development. Micawber is going out to Australia with Little Emily, and it is essential that she should be redeemed in the New World: it is therefore in line with the logic of the book that Micawber too should be redeemed, that the challenge of a new life should enable him to develop his good qualities and bring a reward. But the character would hardly engage our interest as it does if moral development were all Dickens sees in him. What brings Mr Micawber to life is Dickens's view of him as a performer, so thorough-going a performer that we remain uncertain what to make of him.

There are three phases in Mr Micawber's career. The first is when he is the proverbial character we associate with his name, feckless, grandiloquent, volatile, in debt, brewing punch and waiting for something to turn up. Next comes his period in Uriah Heep's employment, when he takes a moral stand and behaves with responsibility and painfully uncharacteristic reticence. After his denunciation of Heep he is freed by Betsey Trotwood's munificence from the toils of debt and goes to Australia and becomes a highly respected member of the community. Orwell regrets the transition from the first to the second stage, when Micawber ceases to be a 'static' character, a caricature, and becomes entangled in a 'would-be

---

5 The idea of a core of instinct or good principle that keeps a character right despite any amount of scrapes and flightiness is a common psychological model in Victorian novels. It begs questions about any interplay there might be between the core and the surface, but offers a tidy way of accounting for the untidiness of human personality. The model is used in Trollope's thinking about Lady Glencora: 'she ... has, beneath the thin stratum of her follies a basis of good principle, which ... taught her to endeavour to do her duty in the position to which she was called.' (Trollope *Autobiography* ch10 p166)

probable melodrama'[6] – as though the great legendary character is diminished by the touch of reality.

Up until the third stage the character survives the touch of reality because Dickens manages to integrate Micawber the shabby, flamboyant, grandiloquent performer with Micawber the moral agent. But when we hear of him as a magistrate, we feel what we never felt before, that the flamboyance and grandiloquence, now without the counter-balancing shabbiness, are nothing more than a manner.

Micawber as Micawber

We first meet Micawber when David goes to stay in his house. The narrative of the childhood years is admirably dense and suggestive, so that within two chapters the main lines of the Micawber character are laid down: his baldness, volatility, fecklessness, grandiloquence and little touches of kindness, and also the tendency of both Micawbers to treat David as grown-up. We also learn of the fatal belief in IOUs:

> Mr Micawber was waiting for me within the gate, and we went up to his room (top story but one), and cried very much. He solemnly conjured me, I remember, to take warning by his fate; and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a-year for his income, and spent nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy, but that if he spent twenty pounds one he would be miserable. After which he borrowed a shilling of me for porter, gave me a written order on Mrs Micawber for the amount, and put away his pocket handkerchief, and cheered up.
>
> (*DC* ch11 p221)

For some reason Dickens departs from the usual terms of Mr Micawber's aphorism, and from the terms which he reports his father as using in the autobiographical fragment quoted by Forster.[7] This would be hardly worth remarking if it were not that in doing so he makes the difference between happiness and misery eighteenpence instead of one shilling, and therefore avoids the coincidental suggestion that Mr Micawber's shilling for porter represents the precise difference between happiness and misery. Elsewhere Dickens enjoys a sort of mock book-

6 'Charles Dickens' p134.

7 *Life of Charles Dickens* I i p16.

keeping, balancing irrelevant sums against each other, but here he indulges another kind of playfulness, pointing up the comedy in the way sums of money are expressed. The phrase used in the following chapter, 'twenty pounds ought and six' (*DC* ch12 p231), certainly has a comic feel to it, but there is also something irresistibly comic about the way 'twenty pounds one' disrupts the syntax of the sentence, suggesting that money has a grammar of its own. The phrase attributed to John Dickens also has a strength of its own: 'a shilling spent the other way'. The point of all these colloquialisms is that they convey the mixture of affection and matter-of-factness with which craftsmen speak of the tools and material of their trade. The preoccupation with small sums of money affects Mr Micawber's speech as thoroughly as the language of funerals affects Mr Omer's way of recalling David's mother and brother: 'The little party was laid along with the other party.' (*DC* ch21 p362)

Dickens insists right from the start on Mr Micawber's kindness and thoroughness. The kindness is dressed in the Micawber style, as in the offer to 'install you in the knowledge of the nearest way', and the thoroughness is always directed at objects like the debtors' petition that 'could never be of any profit to him'. (*DC* ch11 pp211 & 224) These characteristics are not at all inconsistent with the Micawber caricature, but nonetheless they do expand the range of things we see him doing. At least it is not literally true that we always remember him doing the same thing.

The next few encounters add new touches to the portrait, most noticeably the passions for letter-writing and hot punch. We also see David's attitude to Mr Micawber changing. When he is living in the Micawbers' home he is so young that he had no way of judging them. *Roderick Random* has given him an idea of what to expect in a debtors' prison; instinct tells him that Captain Hopkins is not married to his female companion; and his own experience teaches him not to complain. But his reading, instinct and experience don't amount to much, and he is left to make 'his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things!' (*DC* ch11

p225) By the time Mr Micawber turns up in Canterbury, David is that much older and has new ideas and new concerns. In particular he wants to keep his past a secret from new acquaintances such as the Heeps. He is beginning to look critically at Mr Micawber and pass judgement on what he says. Mr Micawber tells Uriah of his pecuniary difficulties, and David comments: 'I knew he was certain to say something of this kind; he always would be so boastful about his difficulties.'[8] (*DC* ch17 p316) A little later in the chapter, David is confident enough to have his own unspoken opinions on Mr Micawber's affairs. (*DC* ch17 p320) Later again, he notices that Mrs Micawber is 'a little more slatternly than she used to be, or so she seemed now, to my unaccustomed eyes' – suggesting that the change might be as much due to his own changed point of view as to any deterioration in Mrs Micawber herself. (*DC* ch27 p469)

As David approaches Traddles's Camden Town lodgings he is repeatedly reminded of his time with the Micawbers. Here Dickens faces Orwell's problem of placing Mr Micawber in a realistic setting. The social observer insists on the 'one monotonous pattern ... like the early copies of a blundering boy who was learning to make houses, and had not yet got out of his cramped brick-and-mortar pothooks,' (*DC*ch27 p461) but the Micawber character requires a house that stands out, a house with pretensions. There is nothing comparable with the account of how the Kenwigses in *Nicholas Nickleby* maintain their gentility in near slum conditions, as in the symbolic muffling of an unused door-knocker as a sign that a 'genteel confinement' is taking place. (*NN* ch36 p543) Dickens rather weakly refers to 'an indescribable character of faded gentility', without suggesting any of the specific elements that make up this character. (*DC* ch27 p461) *Faded* is a surprising word to apply to Mr Micawber, and it is as though Dickens is not thinking of the

---

8 This observation is taken further in *Little Dorrit* where much play is made of how debtors like to exaggerate the amount that they are in debt; and the incident also resembles the crucial moment in Pip's life when he realises that he is able to foretell that Joe is going to recite his father's epitaph in his interview at Satis House. David is never embarrassed by Mr Dick as he is by Mr Micawber: an example of how *David Copperfield*, is less sharp than *Great Expectations*, where simple goodness and the capacity for giving embarrassment are united in the person of Joe.

Micawbers at this point, but writing in general terms of the plight of a man of some pretensions who is forced to live next door to 'a washerwoman who exposes hard-bake for sale in her parlour-window' and opposite a Bow-Street officer. (*DC* ch27 p470)

Inside the house the tension between the overwhelming conditions of poverty and the resilient Micawber spirit is more precisely noted. The walls are thin and David can hear the sound of badly fitting drawers as Mrs Micawber searches for the gloves without which she cannot meet the visitor. Mr Micawber is unchanged, with the same 'genteel and youthful air'. He talks volubly to shut out the sounds of poverty, and when he knocks on Traddles's room door he does so with such a double-knock as 'nobody but Mr Micawber could ever have knocked at that door'. (*DC* ch27 pp467ff) The double-knock is always in Dickens an expression of confidence and self-assertiveness.

There is a great deal of pretence and performance in all this, but it is not clear what exactly Mr Micawber is pretending to be. He is not pretending to be prosperous – given his circumstances such a pretence would be impossible, and in any case, as David notes at the Heeps' house, Mr Micawber is embarrassingly prone to discuss his financial troubles. The phrase 'genteel and youthful air' is full of ambiguity. Is this air only assumed?[9] The bold assertion of gentlemanliness is certainly part of the repertoire of the swindler, and is a device exploited by the father of Marshalsea, but a serious swindler would be more thorough: the imposing shirt collar does not hide the shabbiness of his clothes, even from David's youthful eyes. (*DC* ch11 p210)

There is no suggestion that his gentility is a mask that he throws off in unguarded and private moments in the way Mrs Skewton's youthfulness is

---

9 We don't know how old Mr Micawber is. He is stoutish and middle-aged when David first meets him (*DC* ch11 p210) but the facts of his life suggest that he is then probably only in his late twenties or early thirties, which means that he is now hardly forty. Perhaps the point is to mark a contrast between Mr Micawber and his wife: whatever her age now she does not have a youthful air because the strain and anxiety of their situation falls more heavily on her.

stripped from her at night. (*D&S* ch27 p472) Indeed part of what Orwell is getting at when he writes of Micawber as a static character is that he has no private moments. This is not because he fails as a convincing figure with a continuing existence when he goes out of the door, but rather because he is a compulsive performer who always creates an audience. Alone with his family he makes histrionic gestures with the razor. Deprived of his audience altogether, he falls to writing letters to put himself back on the stage.

The performance itself is what matters, not anything he can hope to make out of it. It is no more utilitarian than Kenwigs's muffled door-knocker. There is as much gusto in his despair as in his moments of jaunty self-confidence. In his characteristic way of speaking he acts two parts, first the orator with the massive phrases rolling off his tongue, and then the terse, plain-spoken fellow who interrupts with 'in short...' (for example when referring to the Cathedral: *DC* ch27 p468) When he delivers his famous advice on keeping annual expenditure below annual income it is as though by acting the part of the prudent counsellor, he becomes really prudent. The legal phraseology of the letters, extending even to the announcement of his wife's pregnancy, appears to Mr Micawber to be 'equivalent to winding up his affairs'. (*DC* ch28 p489) The dangerous aspect of this mixing up of reality and unreality is when he believes the writing of an IOU to be the equivalent of paying ready money – and believes it with such thoroughness as to transmit the belief to Traddles. (*DC* ch36 p600)

An important result of this indifference to reality, and perhaps the most important feature of the Micawber character, is his prodigious resilience.

> It was nothing at all unusual for Mr Micawber to sob violently at the beginning of one of these Saturday night conversations, and sing about Jack's delight being his lovely Nan, towards the end of it. I have known him come home to supper with a flood of tears, and a declaration that nothing was now left but a jail; and go to bed making a calculation of the expense of putting bow-windows to the house, 'in case anything turned up', which was his favourite expression. And Mrs Micawber was just the same.
>
> (*DC* ch11 p219)

On the surface it looks as though the swings of mood are a reaction to events, since they are triggered by external occurrences, such as the falling due of a bill or the arrival of a bailiff or the expected birth of a child which 'may be looked for – in round numbers – at the expiration of a period not exceeding six lunar months from the present date'. (*DC* ch28 p490) But in fact these events are hardly more than cues that prompt another scene, another speech, another letter.

This elasticity would seem a positive thing, a testimony to the unquenchability of the human spirit, if it were not for the suspicion that, as prostration is followed by 'lamb chops, breaded, and ... warm ale' (*DC* ch11 p214), and as sobbing fits give way to singing, the calamities of life are being not so much overcome as ignored. It is brave to play skittles in adversity, as Mr Micawber does on his first day in prison, but there is always the feeling that the propensity to play skittles is partly to blame for the adversity. We can understand how a man can be happily playing skittles, only to have his enjoyment interrupted by a piece of news that prostrates him; we find it less easy to understand how a man's utter prostration can be interrupted by a sudden game of skittles – such rapid recovery tends to make the prostration seem inauthentic, or at least shallow. But in Mr Micawber's case this is not so: he enters thoroughly into both sides of his experience.

Micawber and Heep

There is an obvious advantage in having Heep exposed by his polar opposite, Micawber. The idea of Micawber as one side of a pair of polar opposites arises first in connection with Littimer, whose appearance and unwanted ministrations dampen the enjoyment at David's dinner party: 'Mr Micawber, humming a tune, to show he was quite at ease, subsided into his chair, with the handle of a hastily concealed fork sticking out of the bosom of his coat, as if he had stabbed himself.' (*DC* ch28 p475) Whereas the Micawbers always treat David as grown-up, Littimer's eye is 'fraught ... with the silent conviction that I was very young indeed'. (*DC* ch21 p359) It is hard to say exactly what this particular opposition means, but

it suggests an instinct in Mr Micawber for enlargement, and in Littimer for belittlement.

In the confrontation with Uriah Heep what is good in Micawber is unleashed as a positive force. The unmasking of Heep's villainy in chapter 52 has much of the melodrama about it. It is also an example of the traditional comic theme of seedy hypocrisy being routed by robust good-heartedness.[10] In effect it has much in common with Tony Weller putting Stiggins in the horse trough or Sloppy pitching Silas Wegg into the dust cart. But there is something more: we have here a sense of the price which the good-hearted man must pay in order to defeat the hypocrite.

When he first sees Mr Micawber arm in arm with Uriah, and learns that they have taken brandy-and-water together, David is surprised and 'rather uneasy'. Uriah is evidently exploiting Micawber's 'bland delight in extending his patronage', with the immediate aim of finding out what Mr Micawber knows of David's past. (*DC*ch17 p320) Uriah's motive for later taking up the gauntlet and employing Mr Micawber is apparent enough:

> My friend Heep has not fixed the positive remuneration at too high a figure, but he has made a great deal, in the way of extrication from the pressure of pecuniary difficulties, contingent on the value of my services ...
>
> (*DC* ch36 p594)

In short, Mr Micawber's history of fecklessness, and the debts which have become clearer and more solid in our mind as David's observation becomes more knowing, have placed him in Heep's power, as Newman Noggs is placed in Ralph Nickleby's power. By the time David next meets him, Mr Micawber is already uneasy in his position. His more flamboyant dress has given way to a 'legal-looking suit of black', he has 'an air of constraint' and David concludes that his new duties are 'a misfit'. Uriah has increased his hold by allowing him to draw 'stipendiary emoluments, before those emoluments are strictly due and payable'.[11] (*DC* ch39

---

10 Uriah's 'Micawber, you old bully, I'll pay you!' (*DC* ch52 p829) recalls Malvolio's parting shot: 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.' (*Twelfth Night* V i)

11 The *strictly* here is a typical Micawber evasion. While the payments are not strictly due, he seems to hold out the possibility that they are due in some other sense.

pp628f) At first Mr Micawber tries to accept his role as Uriah's tool, but he is uneasy about it and sees that it cuts him off from family and friends:

> I would therefore take the liberty of suggesting that in our friendly intercourse – which I trust will never be disturbed! – we draw a line. On one side of this line ... is the whole range of the human intellect, with a trifling exception; on the other, *is* that exception; that is to say, the affairs of Messrs Wickfield and Heep, with all belonging and appertaining thereunto.
>
> (*DC* ch39 p629)

He is taking a step towards the division of life into two worlds that is achieved by Wemmick.

Mrs Micawber's letters (*DC* ch42 pp690f; ch49 pp771f) emphasise the mystery and secrecy, estrangement and alienation that characterise Mr Micawber's life. The letters are cleverly composed. The writer is undeniably recognisable as the Mrs Micawber of the early chapters, but she is, we feel, writing carefully, and the glimpses she gives of the Micawber household carry conviction: 'on being childishly solicited for twopence, to buy "lemon-stunners" – a local sweetmeat – he presented an oyster-knife at the twins!' (*DC* ch49 p772) Presenting an oyster-knife at the twins is certainly a Micawber-ish sort of gesture, but it sounds more than a mere gesture, and we are bound to take it more seriously than his 'making motions at himself with a razor'. (*DC* ch11 p214)

The Micawbers are habitually so extravagant in their words and gestures that it is hard to feel convinced that Mr Micawber is suffering under genuine stress. Dickens is not aiming at the sort of realism that would make Mr Micawber merely a representative man in a difficult dilemma, but we must be convinced that the compulsive performer of the early chapters is capable of feeling the genuine impact of external events. Our first reaction is, like David's on receipt of Mrs Micawber's first letter, to treat it all 'rather lightly' (*DC* ch49 p773), but taken together, the two letters prepare us for a change. When Traddles and David meet Mr Micawber in London his diction is if anything more ornate and convoluted ('Mrs Copperfield *in esse*, and Mrs Traddles *in posse* ...' (*DC* ch49 p773)) but the performance breaks down and a new quality of feeling emerges when David mentions first Uriah Heep

and then Agnes. Although David notices that even when 'unfeignedly sobbing' Mr Micawber maintains 'a shadow of the old expression of doing something genteel', there is a certain uncharacteristic simplicity in: 'Take me ... down a turning, for, upon my soul, in my present state of mind I am not equal to this!' (*DC* ch49 p775) Similarly, in the denunciation chapter, Mr Micawber is 'much affected, but still intensely enjoying himself'. (*DC* ch52 p826) There is still more than a bit of play-acting in his behaviour: what makes him an interesting character is the occasional revelation of genuine feeling co-existing with the play-acting. This is something that recurs in Dickens. John Chivery, for example, plays the part of a wounded lover while being genuinely in love with Little Dorrit; and Miss Havisham both indulges in a 'vanity of sorrow' (*GE* ch49 p411) and exhibits genuine feeling.

Mr Micawber looks at the spikes on the prison wall 'with a sentimental expression, as if they were the interlacing boughs of trees that had shaded him in his youth', and goes on to speak enthusiastically of his life in prison. (*DC* ch49 p773) Brushing aside a question about Mrs Micawber, he says:

> And this ... is the Bench! Where, for the first time in many revolving years, the overwhelming pressure of pecuniary liabilities was not proclaimed, from day to day, by importune voices declining to vacate the passage; where there was no knocker on the door for any creditor to appeal to ... Gentlemen, ... when the shadow of that iron-work on the summit of the brick structure has been reflected on the gravel of the Parade, I have seen my children thread the mazes of the intricate pattern, avoiding the dark marks. ... When I was an inmate of that retreat I could look my fellow-man in the face, and punch his head if he offended me. My fellow-man and myself are no longer on those glorious terms!
>
> (*DC* ch49 p774)

The prison is a haven where the usual rules are suspended, where nothing seems to matter, where all effort is fruitless, and all commitments are void.[12] Now that he has come up against both the diabolical Uriah Heep and the 'love, truth and goodness' (*DC* ch49 p775) of Agnes Wickfield, the days of illusion and the glorious simplicity of punching heads are gone.

When he refers to Agnes's 'love, truth and goodness', Mr Micawber is in danger of descending into the role of a mouthpiece, pronouncing the Dickensian orthodoxy

---

12 Mr Micawber's celebration of life in prison is echoed by that of the insolvent doctor in the Marshalsea. (*LD* I 6 p103)

about young heroines. The same can be said of his very protracted denunciation of the 'HEEP of infamy' and the 'avaricious, false and grasping – HEEP'. (*DC* ch52 pp819 & 824) Without a doubt we are supposed to approve of the new Micawber and applaud his explosive breakthrough into solvency and self-respect, but Dickens is aware that for Micawber to become a mouthpiece is a descent. This is why he is so insistent throughout the denunciation scene on Mr Micawber's flourishes and relish and delight in his performance.

The speech in praise of the debtors' prison is a speech in praise of debilitating illusions, but embedded in it is a strong nugget of observation – the children weaving in and out of the shadows of the spikes – which Mr Micawber has carried with him, and brings out now, perhaps as an apology for the oyster-knife. Like faithful recollection of one's own childhood, such tender regard for children is always in Dickens a sign of grace. There is danger in the attractiveness of the irresponsible dreamer, danger which Dickens will expose ruthlessly in Harold Skimpole, but here he seems to see mainly the attractiveness. He is as reluctant to discard the old Micawber as Mr Micawber himself is to forswear his bills and notes of hand.

> To see him at work on the stamps, with the relish of an artist, touching them like pictures, looking at them sideways, taking weighty notes of dates and amounts in his pocket-book, and contemplating them when finished, with a high sense of their precious value, was a sight indeed. ...
>
> 'I trust ... that my son Wilkins will ever bear in mind, that he had infinitely better put his fist in the fire, than use it to handle the serpents that have poisoned the life-blood of his unhappy parent!' Deeply affected, and changed in a moment to the image of despair, Mr Micawber regarded the serpents with a look of gloomy abhorrence (in which his late admiration of them was not quite subdued), folded them up and put them in his pocket.
>
> (*DC* ch54 pp851f)

Orwell is right when he senses a degree of anti-climax in the transition from the glories of the early Micawber to the would-be realism of the Heep period – it is part of the general loss of tone and sparkle that comes upon the book as David moves into adolescence. The picture of Mr Dick and his kite is the last manifestation of that mental atmosphere which Orwell claims was so immediately recognisable to

him as a child that he imagined that the early chapters of *David Copperfield* were written by a child.[13]

> It was quite an affecting sight, I used to think, to see him with the kite when it was up a great height in the air. What he had told me, in his room, about his belief in its disseminating the statements pasted on it, which were nothing but old leaves of abortive Memorials, might have been a fancy with him sometimes; but not when he was out, looking up at a kite in the sky, and feeling it pull and tug at his hand. He never looked so serene as he did then. I used to fancy, as I sat by him of an evening, on a green slope, and saw him watch the kite high in the quiet air, that it lifted his mind out of its confusion, and bore it (such was my boyish thought) into the skies. As he wound the string in and it came lower and lower down out of the beautiful light, until it fluttered to the ground, and lay there like a dead thing, he seemed to wake gradually out of a dream; and I remember to have seen him take it up, and look about him in a lost way, as if they had both come down together, so that I pitied him with all my heart.
>
> (*DC* ch15 pp272f)

Whether this is the authentic fantasy of the child, or merely the adult's ideological view of how the child should have felt, this passage has the feel of an ending. *He never looked so serene as he did then* means that he never looked so serene in those days as he did when kite-flying, but it is hard not to read it as, 'He never looked so serene *again*.' From now on Mr Dick, like Mr Micawber, has serious work to do in the plot, salvaging the Strongs' marriage, and helping Betsey Trotwood cope with her loss of fortune. He becomes 'like one under the propitious influence of a charm, from the moment of his being usefully employed', but good though this is, it is not the same as the kite-flying serenity. (*DC* ch36 p591)

The change is not only in Mr Dick himself: it is as much a transformation in David's way of seeing, a transformation which likewise affects his view of the Micawbers. Innocence has been lost and David has passed into adolescence by the end of Chapter 17, when he is relieved that the Micawbers have left Canterbury. We can no more complain of Mr Micawber's being touched by reality than we can complain of David's growing up. But the point of Orwell's complaint is not that he objects to the touch of reality, but that he finds Dickens's treatment of Micawber in the realistic scenes unconvincing. I have tried to show how our sense of the real context in which Mr Micawber lives gradually develops as David's observations become less childish. What Dickens insists on is that the child's vision remains

---

13 'Charles Dickens' p93.

true, that the child's wonder at Micawber's contradictory personality is as necessary as the adolescent's recognition of his slipperiness and the adult's appreciation of his capacity to struggle. How successful Dickens is in this remains debatable. The denunciation scene is laboured: in the early chapters Mr Micawber's character is established in less space and with less effort than Dickens uses here to prove that it has survived.

Micawber the magistrate

The real problem comes with the final touch, the conversion of Mr Micawber into a magistrate. Perhaps it is done out of laziness, as though Dickens couldn't be bothered to imagine a more plausible form of Antipodean success – or perhaps he was seduced by the prospect of Mr Micawber finding a useful outlet for his passion for legal forms. Chesterton, in his account of the 'great Dickens characters' with their 'grotesque greatness inside an obscure and even unattractive type', insists that the Australian magistracy is a mistake: 'Micawber never did succeed, never ought to succeed; his kingdom is not of this world.' He explains it by reference to Dickens's 'disposition to make his characters grossly and incongruously comfortable', a disposition that is also at work when he turns Dora into a 'dehumanized prig' on her deathbed.[14]

The easy assumption that those who have failed so dramatically in the old country can rise to the top in the new country raises several questions. What, for instance, does it say about Australia? What we want Dickens to be saying is that the new country offers a fresh start to those like Martha who are genuinely willing to reform, and to those like Mr Mell and the Micawbers whose abilities have been ignored by an ungrateful, class-ridden mother country, but we might just as easily draw the opposite conclusion, that in Australia base coin passes for good: former prostitutes pass for good wives and mothers, and failed ushers emerge as doctors. In England a magistrate who was a discharged bankrupt and a windbag would be a satire on the judicial system, while in Australia he turns out to be just the man for

14 *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906) ch10 p257; ch11 p267.

the job. Australia appears both as a new land free from the prejudices and restrictions of the old, and as a dumping ground for misfits. If Dickens holds both these views, he also holds a third, profounder, view which reconciles them: being a misfit, such as a prostitute or bankrupt, is a two-sided matter, and while there might be something 'wrong' with the misfitting individuals, there is also something wrong with the society that offers them nowhere to fit in, and something hopeful in a society that allows them to flower.

It is not that the transformation is absolutely implausible. It is credible that in Australia anyone with a passing acquaintance with the law was at that time so rare a bird that a Mr Micawber might have been recruited into the magistracy. But by making it the culmination of Mr Micawber's career, Dickens is, I think, expecting us not merely to believe in it but to applaud it as heartily as we applaud Traddles's appointment as a judge. This illustrates the vagueness of his notions about public life, as though, for him, all a magistrate needs is to have his heart in the right place. He enquired about becoming a metropolitan magistrate himself in the mid 1840s,[15] and he exercised quasi-judicial powers in Urania Cottage. It is almost alarming to find that he had so little grasp of the personal qualities required for the role that he could see Mr Micawber as a fit candidate. Dickens would doubtless point to Mr Micawber's dedicated detective work in the Heep case and even to the diligence with which he drew up the debtors' petition as evidence of his suitability. Certainly Mr Micawber could play the part of magistrate, as he instantly plays the part of sheep-farmer when the emigration project is suggested, but surely he lacks the objectivity and balance needed by one who is to sit in judgement.

Perhaps I have been naïve in my account of Mr Micawber. Although he is not malignant, but genial and kind-hearted, and even willing to do right when the opportunity presents itself, perhaps in the end he is simply a confidence trickster, exploiting his gentlemanly appearance to the full. At home in England he is never able to hide his shabby cuffs behind the imposing collar, but it could be that in the

---

15 Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens* V i, vol 1 p382.

rougher society of Australia such things don't matter. Viewed in this light, the appointment as magistrate represents a fitting culmination of Mr Micawber's career.

Unless we can see it in some such light as this (and I find it hard to do so) Mr Micawber's promotion seems a mistake, partly because it suggests a shockingly superficial view of what is needed in a magistrate, but above all because it seems to devalue the character of Micawber. If he has really changed enough to become a suitable person to sit in judgement, it can only be because his experience, summed up in Mr Peggotty's description of him sweating in the sun (*DC* ch63 p944), has developed in him a new understanding, a new inner-life. But his manner is unchanged. In the old Micawber we could believe that the inner-life and the manner were one; now there is a severance between them.

Up until this final appearance, Mr Micawber's manner has seemed to be intimately connected with his character. His chaotic, overflowing speeches are the product of his chaotic, overflowing mind. His passion for performing both reveals and masks his actual feelings. The complex, organic relationship between manner and character survives in the Heep episodes but is thrown into question in the final appearance, when the old manner remains, but in a context in which it can be no more than decoration, a mask that can be removed as Mrs Skewton's youthful mask is removed at night. The shabby gentility in difficult circumstances is heroic; the same pretensions carried on in prosperity become a tired joke. The creation of such a personality as Mr Micawber, with all his contradictions, is a conjuring trick, and to preserve the illusion every detail must be right. This is why the Australian magistracy, though no more than a throwaway detail at the end of the story, is so hard to overlook.

Chapter 5: Good and bad housekeeping

Homelessness

The sense of homelessness is extended in *Bleak House* to cover those who have homes which are, in one way or another, not real homes. But whatever he has to say about such metaphorical homelessness, Dickens doesn't for long lose sight of the fact that it's the poor and weak who are left unmetaphorically out in the cold. This is one of the sharp points of reality which he brings into focus in the course of the broad, rhetorical description of the fog:

> ... fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck.
>
> (*BH* ch1 p49)

We might feel that the fog is something that affects everyone, something that nobody can escape, a fit emblem for the Court of Chancery, and the whole world of the novel. Yes, it affects everyone, but it's the little 'prentice boy who is shivering on deck.

The benefactor's home

Taking a homeless outsider into the home is a theme that occurs elsewhere in Victorian fiction (one thinks of *Wuthering Heights* and *John Halifax, Gentleman*), but nowhere more than in Dickens, and in Dickens nowhere more than in *Bleak House*. Mr Snagsby employs a workhouse orphan, survivor of Drouet's farm, and thinks it a charity. (*BH* ch10 p180) George picks up his vagabond servant Phil Squod in the street, and shares what home he has with him. (*BH* ch26 pp420ff) Jo is taken into Bleak House – with consequences which seem to demonstrate that there are limits to how far the home can offer a remedy, even on the individual level, for the problems of society. Esther 'fill[ed] a place' in her godmother's home. (*BH* ch3 p66) Unwittingly Sir Leicester Dedlock has opened his home to a woman who is, in a sense, homeless – bereft of her child and her child's father, and abandoned by her only relative. John Jarndyce, who opens his home to Richard and Ada, Esther, Charley, Jo, and extends its influence still further to include the Skimpoles,

Boythorn, Miss Flite and Gridley, is Dickens's most complex benefactor, and *Bleak House* is his most thorough examination of the home as a model for benevolence in practice.

In *Dombey & Son* Mr Morfin describes himself as a 'creature ... not only of my own habit, but of other people's' and explains how this has inhibited him from helping Harriet and John Carker. Even his feeling that he has no right to intrude, he says, 'may be habit'. (*D&S* ch33 pp559ff) Conscious that neither his own personality, nor the delicate complexity of the human situation will allow his benevolent impulses to translate easily into action, he displays symptoms of frustration – '...walking to the window, and back, and sitting down again, in a state of extreme dissatisfaction and vexation ... rubbing his forehead ... and drumming on the table'. (*D&S* ch33 p559) Mr Morfin exemplifies the neurotic side of benevolence, a side that is developed in the portrayal of later benefactors, such as Betsey Trotwood, John Jarndyce and Mr Meagles.

John Jarndyce has something in common with the Cheerybles, but for him doing good with his money is not the easy matter that it is for them. When Esther sees the old church beside Bleak House she says: 'from rough outsides (I hope I have learnt), serene and gentle influences often proceed.' (*BH* ch8 p142) There is a rough outside to John Jarndyce's eccentricity which Esther encounters on the coach on her way to school, although, while sufficiently alarmed by him to be 'relieved by his departure', Esther assures us that 'he had pleasant eyes'. (*BH* ch3 pp71f) There is still a certain abruptness and unpredictability about him when he welcomes the young people to Bleak House and discusses Mrs Jellyby with them. Esther makes the best of it by insisting that his vexation is 'good natured', but he is brandishing the poker, and this, together with the hint of asceticism in 'his cold bath gaping for him in a smaller room adjoining', suggests a definite ruggedness. (*BH* ch6 pp114 & 116) He warns Esther about the Growlery: 'When I am deceived or disappointed in – the wind, and it's Easterly, I take refuge here.' (*BH* ch8 p144) He is choosing his words carefully, unwilling to give frank expression to his sense

of disappointment in humankind. Esther acquiesces in his determination to blame the wind for his moods, and perhaps underestimates the inner difficulties that he experiences. For her, he is an angel:

> As I sat looking fixedly at him, and the sun's rays descended, softly shining through the leaves, upon his bare head, I felt as if the brightness on him must be like the brightness of Angels.
>
> (*BH* ch64 p913)

This combination of characteristics, eccentric old boy and haloed saint, recalls Sam Weller's 'reg'lar thorough-bred angel' in tights and gaiters (*PP* ch45 p734), but in John Jarndyce there is more than comic Pickwickian incongruity.

The delusion of the benefactor is to believe that he can, in Orwell's words, solve 'everybody's problems' and find a 'remedy for everything'.[1] One version of this delusion is exposed in the account of the telescopic philanthropy and wholesale charity of Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle. For Mrs Jellyby and her associates, *everybody* means the entire species. (*BH* ch4 p86) Another version is seen in those who limit themselves to their small corner, but fancy they can produce a solution that will tie up all the loose ends for everyone involved. Mr Meagles, for example, has thought of everything –

> Let us take one of those same little children to be a little maid for Pet. We are practical people. So if we should find her temper a little defective, or any of her ways a little wide of ours, we shall know what we have to take into account. We shall know what an immense deduction must be made from all the influences and experiences that have formed us ...
>
> (*LD* I 2 p56)

– everything except the little child's own feelings as she fills a place in a house that is not her own, a substitute for Pet's dead twin sister, with a name given her 'like a dog or a cat'. (*LD* I 27 p372) In John Jarndyce's case the neat solutions are to be found first in the marriage of Ada and Richard, which is desirable for 'many reasons'; and secondly in his own marriage to Esther, which will give her a home, a protector and a name, and him a companion. (*BH* ch13 p231; ch44 p667) Neither of these projects works out as he expects.

---

1 'Charles Dickens' p86.

We also see Mr Jarndyce in the more conventional benefactor's role of dispensing money. With the orphaned Neckett children Dickens returns to the benevolent old gentleman finding a deserving street child to seize and save. The Necketts are not entirely friendless. With typical generosity of detail Dickens gives them two friends, the man from Shropshire, and the landlady, doing what she can in her own narrow circumstances, but he invests Charley Neckett with the sentiment he feels for abandoned street children. Esther watches her 'run, such a little, little creature in her womanly bonnet and apron, through a covered way at the bottom of the court; and melt into the city's strife and sound, like a dewdrop in an ocean'– just such an incongruous figure as might catch the Uncommercial Traveller's eye as he walks the city streets. (*BH* ch15 p270)

John Jarndyce takes Charley into his house and gives her to Esther as 'a little present with his love'. (*BH* ch23 p390) Charley's needs neatly match Esther's need for someone to love and educate. John Lucas argues that Charley is diminished by being forced into dependence upon Esther. For all her testimony to Charley's moral qualities and skill, Esther is 'as much trapped inside class-consciousness as anyone in the novel' and so is unable to accept Charley as an equal.[2] He detects a condescending tone in Esther's comments on Charley's progress. When Charley is learning to write Esther notices that the letters are 'so wrinkled, and shrivelled, and tottering' while the hand that makes them is 'so plump and round'. (*BH* ch31 p482) Lucas recalls that this echoes the scene in which we first saw Charley's hands, when it was they that were wrinkled. (*BH* ch15 p262) He describes Charley's behaviour on that earlier occasion as 'the greatest and most deeply moving image of human commitment and selfless duty in the entire novel', and objects to Esther's trivial and condescending remarks.[3] We might feel a similar uneasiness about Pip's description of Joe writing his letter to Biddy (*GE* ch57 pp473f), but there is a difference. By the end of *Great Expectations* the intellectual and social differences

2 *The Melancholy Man* p221.
3 *The Melancholy Man* p220.

between Pip and Joe have been faced, suffered and overcome. This cannot be said of the relationship between Esther and Charley.

However the point of the contrast between the two scenes is not that in one Charley is properly valued, while in the other she is belittled by a class-conscious Esther. What is repeatedly emphasised in the earlier scene is Charley's prematurely adult appearance, and the fact that she is doing a woman's work, and speaks 'O! in such a motherly, womanly way!' (*BH* ch15 p263) The tone of Esther's comments on Charley's joy at playing at being her maid will seem less condescending and obnoxious if we realise that what she is rejoicing in is Charley's playfulness and 'childish exultation'. (*BH* ch31 p483; ch64 p909) Esther does not trivialise Charley's moral worth by remembering that she is a child.

We might, in any case, ask what alternative there is. Should Jarndyce and Esther have made a lady of her, as the Ironmaster insists on making a lady of Rosa? A more sensible alternative would have been to send her to school with her brother and sister. While their schooling is not, so far as we know, as disastrous as that received by Rob Toodle at the Charitable Grinders, Esther is unenthusiastic about it:

> As to Tom, Charley's brother, I am really afraid to say what he did at school in cyphering, but I think it was Decimals. He is apprenticed to the miller, whatever it was; and is a good bashful fellow ...
>
> (*BH* ch67 p933)

There is something of Harold Skimpole in Esther's slighting allusion to arithmetic and relief that Tom has escaped into a good traditional trade. One thinks of Charley Hexam, Bitzer and Uriah Heep, but Tom is bashful, which has a young, natural sound to it, rather than umble. Certainly there is something objectionable in the way Charley is made to present herself to Esther as John Jarndyce's gift, but as an answer to the problem of foundlings and street children the idea of taking one into a loving home is not self-evidently bad, even if, in the end, we feel that the Meagles' experience with Tattycoram is a more likely consequence than the neatly dovetailed relationship between Esther and Charley.

In *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens may have naïvely hoped to extract a social message by generalising the Cheerybles as a microcosm of a better society, but if so it is clear that in *Bleak House* he has moved on. Jarndyce is quite the angel that Esther pictures, but his response to social problems is inadequate. He learns, in the course of the novel, that the world will not fall in with his benevolent dreams. Disappointed in Mrs Jellyby, in Skimpole, in Richard, he might have become cynical and weary of trying to do good, but his disillusion takes the form not of disgust at others, but disgust with himself. The project he abandons is the one which would have given him Esther as his wife.

The Smallweeds

When Charley melts into the 'strife and sound' of the city she goes to work for the Smallweeds, who are one of several examples of metaphorical homelessness in the novel. Judith Smallweed is, in years, hardly older than she is herself. Whereas Charley, though prematurely playing a woman's part, retains the freshness and vitality of a child, Judith and her brother have never been children. George the trooper comments on the contrast. (*BH* ch21 pp351f) For generations the Smallweed family have thought of nothing but making money. The minds of successive generations have been 'lean and anxious'. Their invariable practice has been to be 'early to go out and late to marry' – there has been no childhood, and no young brides in the house. There have been no 'story-books, fairy tales, fictions and fables'. (*BH* ch21 p342) The Uncommercial Traveller contrasts dwelling-houses with sets of chambers:

> In dwelling-houses, there have been family festivals; children have grown in them, girls have bloomed into women in them, courtships and marriages have taken place in them. True chambers never were young, childish, maidenly; never had dolls in them, or rocking-horses, or christenings, or betrothals, or little coffins.
>
> (*UT* XIV 'Chambers' p146)

The Smallweeds' house lacks everything that makes a house fit for people to live in. We hear in gruesomely comic detail how Judith Smallweed collects leftovers for Charley's tea so as to feed her for less than sixpence a day. (*BH* ch21 pp345 & 347) The peculiar meanness of the Smallweeds is conveyed by George's mere presence:

> It is a broadsword to an oyster-knife. His developed figure, and their stunted forms; his large manner, filling any amount of room, and their little narrow pinched ways; his sounding voice, and their sharp spare tones; are in the strongest and the strangest opposition. As he sits in the middle of the grim parlour, leaning a little forward, with his hands upon his thighs and his elbows squared, he looks as though, if he remained there long, he would absorb into himself the whole family and the whole four-roomed house, extra little back-kitchen and all.
>
> (*BH* ch21 349)

This passage comes close to justifying some large, generous act of mayhem against the Smallweeds, like that inflicted on Silas Wegg. (*OMF* IV 14 p862) Dickens expects us to sympathise with George's manhandling of Old Smallweed when he 'adjusts his skull-cap with such a rub, that the old man winks with both eyes for a minute afterwards' – a roughness all the more noticeable because of the light touch with which, a few lines earlier, he has taken off Charley's bonnet. (*BH* ch21 p352) What makes the passage more interesting than an incitement to violence is Dickens's ability to use physical description to imply qualities of spirit. Without equating physical with spiritual largeness – Mrs Pardiggle, after all, is loud enough and big enough to fill the brickworkers' cottage – he gives us enough words which combine a physical with a spiritual meaning ('pinched' and 'spare') to suggest the equation in the particular case.[4] As the confrontation develops we discover that it is George who is in danger of being absorbed by the Smallweeds rather than the other way around.

George observes that not much boiling or roasting is done on the fire (*BH* ch21 p351) and the Smallweed meanness contrasts with the pork and greens in the Bagnet home. But the moral quality of food is not a function of its physical wholesomeness but of the intention of those preparing and eating it – the positive festival atmosphere and conviviality of Mrs Bagnet's birthday are not impaired by 'the dry humour of the fowls in not yielding any gravy'. (*BH* ch49 p724) Other emblems of the contrast between the two families likewise depend on their context:

> 'The old girl,' says Mr Bagnet ..., 'saves. Has a stocking somewhere. With money in it. I never saw it. But I know she's got it.'
>
> (*BH* ch27 p441)

---

[4] Although always ready to use physical descriptions, such as *lean*, with strong pejorative implications, Dickens points out the fallacy – as, for example, when he reminds us of the 'well-conditioned soul' within Mrs Todgers's 'lean and lank body'. (*MC* ch54 p910)

> Mrs Smallweed, following her usual instinct, breaks out with 'Fifteen hundred pound. Fifteen hundred pound in a black box, fifteen hundred pound locked up, fifteen hundred pound put away and hid!'
>
> (*BH* ch21 p346)

Mrs Bagnet's hoard of money suggests generosity and prudence; the Smallweeds' suggests avarice and mania.

The culture of the Smallweed house is one of calculation and hard fact, of distrust of imagination and play. Like Tom Gradgrind, Bart Smallweed is seduced when he comes into contact with debased sensibility.

> He is so much better off than his sister, that on his narrow world of fact an opening has dawned, into such broader regions as lie within the ken of Mr Guppy. Hence, his admiration and his emulation of that shining enchanter.
>
> (*BH* ch24 p344)

Guppy is a half-foolish, half-shrewd young man, who pursues Esther with the phoney sentimental jargon that Dickens often satirises.[5] Bart's ambition is to become a Guppy in clothes and manner (*BH* ch20 p327), and he allows himself to be patronised by his enchanter, but he gives nothing away to him when it comes to business. For a patron, Guppy is curiously dependent on Bart's advice and precocious knowingness. Freed from the grim economies of his sister, Bart enjoys his food, insisting on the best cut, and (unlike the Bagnets) being 'adamant' in the matter of gravy, but he doesn't forget to enjoy it at Guppy's expense. (*BH* ch20 p330) At the end of the meal, when Bart adds up the bill from memory it is a comic performance, but there is also something alarming about it. (*BH* ch20 p337) The application of his narrow, calculating mind to the procurement of pleasure suggests an as yet unrealised capacity for doing harm. Amorous adventures are hinted at.

---

5 Like Uriah Heep, Guppy lives with his demanding mother and offends right-minded characters by aspiring to the hand of the heroine. Is he truly 'in love' with Esther? It is evident from the change that comes over him when Esther lifts her veil after her illness (*BH* ch38 p598) that it was not only material gain that he wanted from her. Does this amount to a sort of sincerity? It hardly makes sense to ask, his motives are so confused and his self-awareness so limited. He is, as we see at the beginning, quite at home in the London fog. (*BH* ch3 p76) By the end of the book he has found his place in the legal system, opening an office in Lambeth. (*BH* ch64 p917) Presumably this represents a level of practice below even that of Mr Vholes. Thus the system of law represented by the likes of Kenge and Vholes spreads out from the centre and on into another generation. If the combustion of Krook symbolises the ultimate destruction of the out-dated system of Chancery, who is it that emerges from the ashes? – Guppy, with his clerk-to-be, Jobling, the lawyers of the future.

(*BH* ch20 p327) Dickens prudishly pretends they are all facetious gossip, but had he looked longer at them he would have seen their sinister implications. While at the end of the book we feel that Old Smallweed's defeat by Bucket (*BH* ch62) marks the end of his predatory career, Young Smallweed remains, a legacy of his upbringing in the school of greed and hard facts. Bart's potential for mischief is realised by another old young man, Fledgeby in *Our Mutual Friend*, and Fledgeby's punishment (being beaten up by Lammle and tortured by Jenny Wren (*OMF* IV 8)) seems to confirm the suspicion that Dickens finds no answer to the Smallweeds except violence.

Mrs Jellyby and Caddy

Neglect of the home is one of the main charges brought by Dickens against the charitable activists. There is a good deal of fun in the account of the squalor and chaos of the Jellyby home but the more poignant aspect of Mrs Jellyby's failure is her inability to show the affection that Caddy craves. Feeling that 'she would far rather have been scolded than treated with such indifference', Caddy strives to provoke an emotional response when she leaves her mother, but is met with: 'I have engaged a boy. ... have I inclination to be angry, or time to be angry?' (*BH* ch23 p388; ch30 p480) This recalls Esther's own unhappiness when she notices that Rachael is not sad to see her go. (*BH* ch3 p70)

Caddy resents the work she has to do for her mother, but without Esther's intervention she would not have overcome Prince Turveydrop's fear of his father, and would probably have married Mr Quale and his mission. Instead she marries the dancing master – dancing being the antithesis of the earnest activities of her mother's friends. She has a useful life, in the sense that she provides a home for her father (as well as Prince's) and for her little brother, and supports the family and looks after her husband when he is unable to work. Along the way she expands the circle of her sympathy to include Miss Flite, but that is as far as she goes in the direction of social action. She has given up her mother's telescopic philanthropy and decided that her duty begins in her own home and family – and also that it

more or less ends there. She has a career, but any possible conflict between this and her role as homemaker is glossed over by the fact that she carries it on mainly in the home.

There is something sad about the way Caddy makes the best of things –

> If Ma had been like anybody else, I might have had some little musical knowledge to begin upon. However, I hadn't any; and that part of the work is, at first, a little discouraging, I must allow. But I have a very good ear, and I am used to drudgery – I have to thank Ma for that, at all events – and where there's a will there's a way ... Don't laugh at me, please; that's a dear girl!
>
> (*BH* ch34 p594)

– and, like Esther, we are as likely to cry as to laugh. But Esther does neither: her reaction now is as caring and as careful as her refusal, at the beginning of the book, to be provoked by Caddy's adolescent rudeness.

> I encouraged her and praised her with all my heart. For I conscientiously believed, dancing-master's wife though she was, and dancing-mistress though in her limited ambition she aspired to be, she had struck out a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry and perseverance that was quite as good as a Mission.
>
> (*BH* ch38 p594)

She is accepting second best on Caddy's behalf, as she accepts it on her own behalf when she gives up her thoughts of Allan Woodcourt. Unfortunately no-one is going to rescue Caddy from the consequences of this 'limited ambition'. Esther, we suspect, has made an effort to overcome a measure of disapproval of Caddy's choice – the *conscientiously* is directed at that part of herself which isn't quite ready to accept that Prince is a proper husband. She knows that praise and encouragement are what Caddy needs, and she dispenses them conscientiously.

When Caddy makes the best of things, she is also making the best of herself. She accepts what her upbringing has made her, and does what she can with it. That the damage inflicted by her childhood is, to some extent, ineradicable is suggested by the fact that that, for all her efforts, her home never quite seems right. Following the pattern of her parents' marriage, she has chosen a weak man, weak not just in that he is, eventually, unable to earn a living for the family, but also in that he has never been able to stand up to his father, so that their homelife has to be built upon the myth of Old Turveydrop's importance. It is the apprentices who,

more than anything else, seem wrong. They are a melancholy parody of the children who should fill the home:

> 'Four,' said Caddy, 'One in-door, and three out. They are very good children; only when they get together they *will* play – children-like – instead of attending to their work. So the little boy you saw just now waltzes by himself in the empty kitchen, and we distribute the others over the house as well as we can.' ...
>
> I asked Caddy what had made their parents choose this profession for them? Caddy said she didn't know; perhaps they were designed for teachers; perhaps for the stage. They were all people in humble circumstances, and the melancholy boy's mother kept a ginger-beer shop.
>
> (*BH* ch38 pp593ff)

The denial of childhood goes on. Caddy professes sympathy for their laborious life, saying they remind her of the Sweeps,[6] but it does not seem to strike her as wrong to collude with parents who are exploiting their children for the sake of fantasies of social advancement. Esther's attitude is not clear. She seems more amused than concerned. She does not want to disturb Caddy's peace of mind, and also, perhaps, she has come up against the limits of her own sympathy. She is gentler in her remarks about these poor little children than she is about the 'hideous boy' who rests his chin on the spikes of the railings of Coavinses' Castle (*BH* ch15 p260), but she is not concerned about their plight. And yet in her description of the house during Caddy's illness, Esther leaves us with one of the abiding images of the book:

> And it seemed so curious that her pale face and helpless figure should be lying there day after day, where dancing was the business of life; where the kit and the apprentices began early every morning in the ballroom, and where the untidy little boy waltzed by himself in the kitchen all the afternoon.
>
> (*BH* ch50 p739)

Dickens has emphatic and important things to say about the ideal of the home and about the home as a model for social improvement, but this disturbing picture of the waltzing boy in the kitchen warns us not to oversimplify. Caddy's domestic arrangements are not as appalling as her mother's but neither are they as perfect as Esther's. Perhaps they provide just that element of unheroic, incomplete virtue that we found to be lacking in the account of the social activists. Although the handicapped baby seems to hint at something profoundly unthriving about Caddy

6 She is probably thinking of the dancing sweeps, but there is obviously a very sinister echo in the reference.

and Prince and their home, the child offers Caddy a new challenge, a new opportunity to serve others and to develop her practical skills.

Lady Dedlock

Lady Dedlock dwells in a succession of non-homes (*BH* ch2 p58), and her exile from the comfort and fulfilment of home-life is a crucial theme in her story, but when she becomes homeless in the full sense we are in no doubt that this is something new and different. The shocking reality of unmetaphorical homelessness makes Esther faint as she thinks of '*my* mother lying down in such a wood to die'. (*BH* ch57 p839) The horror is enhanced by contrast with the cosiness of the inn, the landlady and her daughters. It is a commonplace that extreme physical suffering is made worse by contrast with the simultaneous well-being of others, but who is supposed to be making the comparison, the sufferer or the comfortable observer? We indulge in this sentimentality to avoid the pure simple horror, in its own right, of extreme suffering. Nonetheless Lady Dedlock's physical affliction is intensified by her spiritual suffering as a woman cut off from home and family life, and the reference to the landlady's daughters points to Esther's consciousness that she, Lady Dedlock's daughter, is not with her.

As we pursue Lady Dedlock to the end, we ask what her fate means. In coming to die near her lover's grave, is she in a sense coming home, as though the step of the graveyard has been transformed into a home by Jo's act of sweeping it, sweeping it 'very busily and trimly' out of an instinct of gratitude to one who 'wos wery good to me'? (*BH* ch11 p203) Or is her death in that 'place of abomination' (*BH* ch16 p278) supposed to make manifest the true, hidden, character of her whole life, and reveal that, all the time she was living in her mercenary marriage, she was truly homeless? In other words, the place of abomination seems to represent both a culmination of a life of 'homelessness' and a true homecoming.

Esther's thoughts at the inn illustrate how thoroughly Dickens manages to entangle the full physical sense of homelessness with the wider metaphorical sense. The realisation of the horrors of actual homelessness risks being weakened by the

generalisation of the idea to include Lady Dedlock surrounded by her admirers at Chesney Wold, or the neglected Jellyby children, or the loveless and joyless Smallweed kitchen. As John Carey says of the prison metaphor that dominates *Little Dorrit*, 'If society is a prison, then there is no great difference between being in prison and out of it.'[7] But Dickens insists on having it both ways. We do not say, as we contemplate her life of spiritual homelessness, that at least Lady Dedlock is warm and is not wandering the streets in the snow; nor, as we contemplate her death beside the graveyard, that her dying there is after all no more appalling than what she has suffered during her life. Dickens successfully defeats any inclination we may feel to make these comparisons.

What to do about the poor: Woodcourt, Snagsby, Rouncewell and Bucket

The contrast between the warmth of the inn and the cold of the nearby woods is an idea which, elsewhere, Dickens develops with clear and particular consequences. The physical proximity of the very poor, with their dirt, their disease and their unburied dead, is a threat to the health of the comfortable.

> With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate – with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life – here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together.
>
> (*BH* ch11 pp202f)

In case this language is too abstract, Jo points out the implications with greater particularity:

> Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchin winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They wos obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom, if the gate was open. That's why they locks it, I s'pose ... It's always locked. Look at the rat. ...Hi, look! there he goes! Ho! Into the ground!
>
> (*BH* ch17 p278)

Since Dickens is plainly writing here as an advocate of sanitary reform, is the religious language intended, as Carey suggests, merely to give his message 'some rhetorical clothing to make it seem less self-interested'?[8]

---

7 *The Violent Effigy* p114.
8 *The Violent Effigy* p123.

Where we might seek to separate the sanitary from the religious impulse, Dickens mixes them up. The failure of religion in the case of Hawdon is not just a failure to respect the decencies of Christian burial. The fact about Hawdon is that he is utterly alone, and is therefore nobody. Those who might acknowledge a duty towards him, his mistress, his daughter and his old army comrade, do not know of his existence; those who know of his existence think of him in impersonal terms – except for Jo, who, as the coroner decides, is as much a nonentity as Hawdon himself. To Mr Snagsby he is the man who can copy 'five-and-forty folio' overnight; on Mrs Snagsby he makes a slight impression (so slight that she does not get his name right) as a man with certain attractiveness about him. (*BH* ch11 p193) By the repeated satirical use of the religious phrase 'Our dear brother,' drained of meaning, Dickens reminds us that Christian society acknowledges a duty towards these nobodies, but fails to carry it out. This is more than rhetorical clothing. It is perhaps true, as Carey says, that this treatment of the graveyard weakens its impact as a 'powerfully-apprehended physical object'[9] but it enables Dickens to use the horror surrounding Nemo's death to convey more forcibly the horror of his life.

The sanitary reformer must think in wholesale terms, while the religious impulse takes account of the individual. At the one extreme is the call of the Uncommercial Traveller to 'seize and save' the urchins in the gutter, at the other the diffidence of Mr Morfin who feels he should not intrude. There is a hint of these tensions in Allan Woodcourt's mind when, in Nemo's room, he manifests a 'professional interest in death' as well as an interest in the dead man's personal circumstances (*BH* ch11 p191), but there is no sense of how he balances the two. When he orders the cat out of the room, is he thinking of hygiene or respect for the dead? (*BH* ch11 p194)

A plea for decent deep burial is both a religious and a sanitary plea. Conflict arises when society, in order to protect and improve the lives of the poor, starts to think what to do with existing graveyards and existing dead bodies. Here the

9 *The Violent Effigy* p123.

demands of social hygiene might well be inhibited by respect for the individual dead. Reasonably enough Dickens does not go into this particular question, but social hygiene is not a matter of graveyards alone. The very poor, as a whole, in life as well as in death, constitute a hygiene problem, with children carrying disease into the homes of the rich, and with unspeakable things floating in the river.

One of Esther's first experiences of London is the sight of 'the extraordinary creatures in rags, secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish for pins and other refuse'. (*BH* ch5 p97) This activity could be regarded as profitable scavenging, as practised by the paper-collecting poor of Paris who are praised in *Our Mutual Friend*, but in Esther's words it is more suggestive of dirt and vermin. She feels a distance between herself and the mass of the poor, a lack of instinctive sympathy, which she can only overcome in cases of individual suffering, such as Jo, Charley and the brickworkers' wives. The understandable reaction of the genteelly nurtured young woman to her first glimpse of 'extraordinary creatures in rags' suggests that it is true that she is not yet ready to deal effectively with the poor in situations where her sympathy is not engaged. The crucial question is whether there are skills and experiences that will make her more ready to do so, or whether any attempt to help the poor at any level except that of individual sympathy is bound to end in Mrs Pardiggle's brand of charity.

Dickens's solution to the moral-cum-hygienic problem of the living poor, insofar as he offers one in *Bleak House*, is first of all political regeneration, changing the system, getting rid of Chancery and Boodle and Noodle. But given that this has not yet come about, he offers two models of social action: the doctor, and the police inspector – not the clergyman in this case. Doctor and policeman approach the problem with intimate knowledge combined with detachment.

Allan's treatment of Jo is significant. Allan is wary and has to overcome his repugnance before he can bring himself to touch the boy who gave Esther the fever. (*BH* ch46 pp688f) The good doctor is not an impersonal instrument of social amelioration, but comes to his task with his own feelings, his own life, his own

weakness and prejudice. We have seen in Dickens's own attitudes to the poor a conflict between the tendency to see them in the mass as things and a strong impulse to feel sympathy with individuals. Interestingly, it is when Jo is most thing-like that Allan feels sympathy:

> [Jo] lies in the corner up against the hoarding so like a growth of fungus or any excrescence produced there in neglect and impurity, that Allan Woodcourt is softened towards him.
>
> (*BH* ch46 p687)

Allan is a variation of the idealised benefactor – he walks the streets on the look out for objects of charity, ready to help, with a stock of sympathy and knowledge as inexhaustible as John Jarndyce's purse. But he works alone, and is not always there. We cannot doubt the usefulness of the life he leads 'at a certain place in Yorkshire' but by being useful there he deserts Tom-all-alone's.

Mr Jarndyce paints this picture of the job that Woodcourt goes to in Yorkshire:

> ... a medical attendant for the poor ... It is a thriving place, pleasantly situated; streams and streets, town and country, mill and moor; and seems to present an opening for ... a man whose hopes and aims may sometimes lie ... above the ordinary level, but to whom the ordinary level will be high enough after all, if it should prove to be a way of usefulness and good service leading to no other.
>
> (*BH* ch60 p872)

This de-idealises Woodcourt's role, by insisting on the 'ordinary level' of his service, but at the same time it places him on the side of an ideal future, in a community in which there is no legacy of slums, disease and deprivation. When Parliament has abolished Chancery, and when we start to build new communities on humane lines, then we shall cease to breed new versions of Tom-all-alone's. Mr Jarndyce's picture is incomplete. The idyll is situated at the meeting-point of town and country, which Dickens elsewhere stigmatizes as blighted territory, 'the neutral ground upon the outskirts of the town, which was neither town nor country, yet was either spoiled'. (*HT* I 3 p55)

When we come to see Allan and Esther's new home the picture is still more idealised:

> a cottage, quite a rustic cottage of doll's rooms; but such a lovely place, so tranquil and so beautiful, with such a rich and smiling country spread around it; with water sparkling away into the distance, here all overhung with summer growth, there turning a humming mill; at its nearest point glancing through a meadow by a

> cheerful town, where cricket-players were assembling in bright groups, and a flag was flying from a white tent that rippled in the sweet west wind.
>
> (*BH* ch64 p912)

The town is receding; the mill is probably the sort that grinds corn rather than driving looms, and generally there is more stream than streets. Dickens is rewarding his hero and heroine with exemption from the world that has been so powerfully realised throughout the rest of the novel. There's nothing wrong with this, nothing wrong with suggesting that, given modest aims, conscientious application to duty, and a clean slate, it is possible to create a better future, but it does involve abandoning Tom-all-alone's and the existing poor to their fate.

One person who does not abandon Tom-all-alone's is Mr Snagsby with his half-crowns. He claims no credit for his charity – indeed is rather ashamed of it. His half-crown balsam is an inadequate answer to the great problem, and doesn't go very far even when applied to an individual case such as Jo's, but at least half-a-crown won't get Jo into trouble, as Lady Dedlock's carelessly bestowed gold coin gets him into trouble both with his neighbours and with the police. (*BH* ch19) Snagsby is not intelligent, but conscientious, well-meaning and baffled. When we first read that Guster is 'a satisfaction to Mr Snagsby, who thinks it a charity to keep her' (*BH* ch10 p180), we expect him to turn out to be a minor Pumblechook demanding gratitude, but the simple doggedness with which he pursues his career of donating half-crowns eventually wins our respect, particularly in comparison with the empty preaching of the Chadbands.

Snagsby is a dreamer. One of his dreams –

> He gets such a flavour of the country out of telling the two 'prentices how he *has* heard say that a brook 'as clear as crystal' once ran down the middle of Holborn, when Turnstile really was a turnstile, leading slap away into meadows – gets such a flavour of the country out of this, that he never wants to go there.
>
> (*BH* ch10 p182)

– is very like the vision of the new Bleak House. What should we make of this similarity? Intentionally or not, Dickens is offering us in advance the pin with which to burst the wonderful idealistic balloon which will be inflated at the end.

Recalling Snagsby's dream, we realise that the 'cheerful town' is not guaranteed to remain cheerful, but could be ruined like the once bucolic Holborn.

A different picture of a new industrial community is given in the account of the iron country. With his factory, bank and house, Rouncewell dominates his town as Bounderby dominates Coketown. The men are Rouncewell's hands – a term used here without apology or the irony with which it will be laden in *Hard Times*:

> Some of Rouncewell's hands have just knocked off for dinner-time, and seem to be invading the whole town. They are very sinewy and strong, are Rouncewell's hands – a little sooty too.
>
> (*BH* ch63 p902)

> The work went on, until the noon-bell rang. More clattering upon the pavements. The looms, and wheels, and Hands, all out of gear for an hour.
>
> (*HT* I 11 p108)

The thoughtful and generous way in which he manages his personal and family affairs marks the difference between Rouncewell and the blustering, phoney Bounderby. (*BH* cc28 & 63) The crucial difference lies in their attitude to their past. Bounderby denies his own mother in order to create a self-glorifying myth; Rouncewell is proud enough of having made his own way and won the right to speak as man-to-man with Sir Leicester, but recognises the dignity enjoyed by his mother as the Dedlock housekeeper. The personal worth and integrity of the new industrialist is all the guarantee we have that the vision of the new Bleak House might be fulfilled, and that the doctor and his wife will not find themselves still, as in London, comforting the dying victims of hunger and squalor.

The meeting and mutual respect of the Rouncewell brothers seem to offer a promise of some sort of reconciliation between the energy and ambition of the new order and the quieter and more stable society represented by the better aspects of Chesney Wold. There is no doubt where the future lies:

> Then they once more shake hands long and heartily, and part; the ironmaster turning his face to the smoke and fires, and the trooper to the green country. Early in the afternoon, the subdued sound of his heavy military trot is heard on the turf in the avenue, as he rides on with imaginary clank and jingle of accoutrements under the old elm-trees.
>
> (*BH* ch63 p908)

As the ironmaster goes back to business, the trooper withdraws into the world of his imagination.

With Woodcourt engaged in building a possibly brighter future elsewhere, Inspector Bucket remains to deal with the problems left over from the past. The police represent the need to do things to the poor which are neither what they want nor even necessarily for their own good, but for the good of society. As Bucket makes clear, society means first of all Mr Tulkinghorn and Sir Leicester Dedlock. (*BH* ch57 p830) If his mission to save the Dedlock name involves putting Jo in hospital and giving him a little money this is plainly a secondary consideration. (*BH* ch46 p690)

Eventually, as he plays his part in the resolution of the plot, escorting Esther with gallantry and compassion, and assisting in the partial defeat of the Smallweeds, wagging his finger, manipulating people with his peculiarly persuasive line in small-talk, Bucket emerges as an intriguing, almost an engaging character. We cannot forget how he treats Jo, nor help echoing Esther's 'Poor creature!' and resenting the rejoinder: 'Poor enough ... and trouble enough, and well enough away from London, or anywhere else' (*BH* ch57 p830) – which amounts, of course, to saying what Esther learnt from Miss Barbary, that it would have been better if Jo had not been born. It is a realistic professional assessment, but the gusto with which Bucket asserts it is shocking. On the other hand, he rebukes Lizzie for saying her child would be better off dead, offering her the glib advice to 'train him respectable'. (*BH* ch22 p367) Bucket's combination of personal kindness, manifested in the case of Gridley, with professional ruthlessness is something that will be explored further in Wemmick.

Bucket's solution of the Tulkinghorn murder (like the murder itself) seems contrived and unconvincing, but the moment of insight when he realises he and Esther have been following a false trail is more a credible representation of the detective as guardian. In the picture of the police as a whole we get the sense of a secret network or machine, of insect-like efficiency and activity. (*BH* ch59 p858;

ch22 pp363f) There is something inhuman about this breed of men, with their uniform, their set phrases and their apparent indifference to whatever goes on around them. They are a new institution, an improvement, in their own eyes and in Dickens's, on the old regime of 'imbecile civilian[s]', the beadle and watchman. (*BH* ch11 p195)

Dickens makes fun of the policeman, but is impressed by them. They are powerful and alert, but apparently with no purpose of their own – efficient machines at the service of others. The most machine-like policeman is the one who brings Jo to Mr Snagsby's. He is not stupid, but he has surrendered his right to think beyond his orders, which are that Jo must move on. Dickens does not mitigate the inhumanity of the function he is fulfilling, but allows him a certain humanity as he 'makes the echoes of Cook's Court perform slow music for him as he walks away on the shady side, carrying his iron-bound hat in his hand for a little ventilation'. (*BH* ch19 p322)

In the end we cannot say whether Dickens approves of the new police force as the proper instrument of social sanitation. Perhaps he feels that so long as the inhuman discipline is couched in homely terms ('Get out of this, come! Cut it', and so on), and so long as a man like Bucket has heart enough to sympathise even with a victim, everything is all right. His account of the police seems neutral, as though he is saying not, This is the best way to keep the diseased and lawless poor at bay, but, This is how, at present, society is keeping them at bay. But most of all he is intrigued by the physical presence of a new breed of man:

> with his shining hat, stiff stock, inflexible great-coat, stout belt and bracelet, and all things fitting, [he] pursues his lounging way with a heavy tread: beating the palms of his white gloves one against the other, and stopping now and then, at a street-corner, to look casually about for anything between a lost child and a murder.
> (*BH* ch11 p196)

Esther

The quality of Esther's narrative

Esther Summerson's keys irritate many readers, who are, like Esther herself, 'really vexed' when they find her 'coming into the story again'. (*BH* ch9 p163) One way in which Esther's character is devalued is by depriving her of the credit for the most striking moments in her narrative. There are passages in which her descriptions have the inventiveness and vivacity of the main narrative. For instance, she notices Mr Kenge 'standing with his back to the fire, and casting his eyes over the dusty hearth-rug as if it were Mrs Jellyby's biography' (*BH* ch4 p82); she picks up an oddly suggestive piece of jargon to do with Pa Jellyby's bankruptcy: '"gone through the gazette," was the expression Caddy used, as if it were a tunnel' (BH ch30 p471); she describes the papers on Rick's desk as 'dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind' (*BH* ch51 p750), and the early passers-by in Deal as 'spinning themselves into cordage'. (*BH* ch45 p674) She sees with Dickens's eye, as in a series of observations of Mr Vholes's hands and gloves (*BH* ch60 pp876ff), which pick up the main narrator's observation that Mr Vholes takes off his gloves 'as if he were skinning his hands'. (*BH* ch39 p605)

Of her first morning at Bleak House she says:

> It was interesting when I dressed before daylight, to peep out of window, where my candles were reflected in the black panes like two beacons, and, finding all beyond still enshrouded in the indistinctness of last night, to watch how it turned out when the day came on. As the prospect gradually revealed itself, and disclosed the scene over which the wind had wandered in the dark, like my memory over my life, I had a pleasure in discovering the unknown objects that had been around me in my sleep. (*BH* ch8 p142)

Peep, here is very Little Woman-ish, as are the two dull images in the first sentence (*beacons ... enshrouded*), but then comes the startling comparison between memory and the wind blowing over a darkened landscape, an idea sufficiently alarming to make Esther take refuge in the housekeeperly pleasures of taking stock of her surroundings. Like Dickens, Esther cannot see without responding imaginatively and emotionally to what she sees – or her imagination and emotions determine what she actually sees:

> It was a sombre day, and drops of chill rain fell at intervals. It was one of those colourless days when everything looks heavy and harsh. The houses frowned at us, the dust rose at us, the smoke swooped at us, nothing made any compromise about itself, or wore a softened aspect. I fancied my beautiful girl quite out of place in the rugged streets; and I thought there were more funerals passing along the dismal pavements, than I had ever seen before.
>
> (*BH* ch51 p750)

Nothing made any compromise about itself conveys the sense we have everywhere in Dickens of a world in which things have a life of their own.[10]

Some critics claim that passages like these show us Dickens intruding with his own voice into Esther's narrative, giving it a vivacity which is out of character.[11] Certainly such passages stand out against the background of much of Esther's prose. We take her at her own, and other people's, estimation, as the safe, reliable Little Woman, and don't expect these flashes of Dickensian fancy and wit. But an argument over whether or not Esther would have been capable of such writing is bound to be circular, since the evidence on which we base our assessment of her capabilities consists of what she actually writes, and if we assume that such passages are the author's voice rather than hers we are pre-judging the issue.[12]

Esther and her shadow

Esther is quick to notice light and shade, a pair of opposites (like beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty) conventionally associated with, respectively, good and evil. Dickens is happy to exploit this association, as in the description of John Jarndyce and his halo, but he does not feel obliged to abide consistently by the convention. In the 'intensely sunny street' in the dull Lincolnshire town the shade is beneficent. (*BH* ch18 p298) The opposition between light and shade (together with the whole idea of a halo) is questioned when we hear of the Lord High Chancellor having a 'foggy glory round his head'. (*BH* ch1 p50) And in Esther's

---

[10] The beautiful girl in the rugged streets recalls Esther's belief in gentle influences proceeding from rough outsides. (*BH* ch8 p142; see above, page 150) Ada's gentle influence is not enough to save Rick, but she herself proves surprisingly resilient.

[11] See for example W J Harvey in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century* p147.

[12] Robert Newsom in '*Villette* and *Bleak House*: Authorizing Women' (*Nineteenth Century Literature* vol 46 No1) argues for an 'angry and witty' side to Esther's character comparable with that of Lucy Snowe.

description of her first morning at Bleak House, it is the shadow of the church that suggests 'serene and gentle influences'. (*BH* ch8 p142)

In this last instance the distinction is not between light and shade, but between a shadow and the object whose shadow it is. The implication is that the shadow tells us more about the real nature of the church than its 'rugged' exterior. Not all shadows are so benign:

> Mr Vholes put his dead glove, which scarcely seemed to have any hand in it, on my fingers, and then on my guardian's fingers, and took his long thin shadow away. I thought of it on the outside of the coach, passing over all the sunny landscapes between us and London, chilling the seed in the ground as it glided along.
>
> (*BH* ch45 p673)

Unlike the shadow of the church, which transforms our impression from one of ruggedness to serenity, the shadow passing over the sunny landscapes does not suggest anything about Mr Vholes that is different from what we have already learnt about him, but it is a powerful visual representation of his furtive menace.

A shadow can serve as a gentle contrast to a harsh object, or as a baleful extension of a threatening object. Which of these, if either, is Esther's own shadow?

> One sunny afternoon, when I had come home from school with my books and portfolio, watching my long shadow at my side, and as I was gliding upstairs to my room ...
>
> (*BH* ch3 p66)

This is a telling image of loneliness, the little girl with her long shadow for company, but when, much later, we come to the passage about Vholes's blighting shadow and find that it contains similar terms (*long*, *gliding*) we get an idea of the depth of Esther's self-hatred and self-distrust. This is the girl who will see herself as the ghost 'bring[ing] calamity upon the stately house'. (*BH* ch36 p571)

She has been brought to this state by a combination of her godmother's stern religion, and the more everyday coldness of Rachael, her aunt's servant. Her godmother says:

> You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart.
>
> (*BH* ch3 p65)

Esther can read an even more explicit message in her face –

> It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!
>
> (*BH* ch3 p64)

– and concludes:

> I felt the distance between my godmother and myself so much more ... and felt so sensible of filling a place in her house which ought to have been empty, that I found her more difficult of approach, though I was fervently grateful to her in my heart, than ever. I felt in the same way towards my school companions; I felt in the same way towards Mrs Rachael, who was a widow; and O, towards her daughter, of whom she was proud, who came to see her once a fortnight!
>
> (*BH* ch3 p66)

The affectionate *little Esther* stands out. How does it find its way into this speech that Esther reads in her godmother's face? It does not appear in Miss Barbary's quoted words. Does the child sense some remnant of stifled human feeling in her godmother's gloomy look? Or does it originate from Esther's sense of her own littleness? This would be in character for a child who talks to herself, watches her own long shadow, and who knows that she is unwanted, unprotected and alone.

Behind the casual reference to Mrs Rachael's daughter lies a fortnightly series of humiliations and rejections. Rachael's daughter is Esther's Estella, fuelling the unwanted child's desire for beauty and affection. Unlike Pip, Esther is fervently, abjectly, grateful to the woman who has given her a place in her house. The trouble is, nobody wants her gratitude. Whereas Pip fails to show the proper emotion on leaving his childhood home, Esther is ready with the right feelings, but the adult world, in the person of Rachael, 'went in before my boxes were lifted to the coach-roof, and shut the door'. (*BH* ch3 p70)

The crucial difference between Pip and Esther is in the solutions they adopt: where Pip resolves to become a gentleman, Esther resolves to become good.[13]

> Dear, dear, to think ... how often I repeated to the doll the story of my birthday, and confided to her that I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confessedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could.
>
> (*BH* ch3 p65)

---

[13] This sounds a harsher judgement on Pip than is fair. Esther, who already has an education and many of the attributes of a lady, doesn't have the same temptation as Pip to see gentility as a way out of her predicament.

She repeats this resolution at intervals throughout her life:

> They said I was so gentle; but I'm sure *they* were! I often thought of the resolution I had made on my birthday, to try to be industrious, contented and true-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love if I could; and indeed, indeed, I felt almost ashamed to have done so little and have won so much.
>
> (*BH* ch3 p73)

Self-deprecation runs through all Esther's descriptions of her loving relationships. She cannot understand why people are grateful to her and love her. One is tempted to think her hypocritical – here she is, striving to make people love her, and yet professing amazement when she achieves precisely this result – but her self-distrust is credible and genuine, mingled as it is with distrust of others, as in the test that she devises for Ada in the matter of her altered looks. (*BH* ch36 p572)

She knows that she has adopted goodness, gentleness and true-heartedness as a stratagem to deal with her appalling situation, so that her kind deeds are, in the last resort, self-regarding. She is playing a part in order to elicit a response from others. Perhaps when a pretence is as thorough-going as hers, it ceases to be a pretence, but then what about Pecksniff? He makes a very thorough pretence of virtue. *We* might say it is a virtuous stratagem but she is conscious above all that it is a stratagem. She has an ideal of spontaneous, real goodness, goodness done entirely for its own sake, the goodness personified by John Jarndyce: 'all this happiness shone like a light from one central figure.' (*BH* ch44 p666)

Whereas Esther is always conscious of her need to be loved in return for her kindness, she sees John Jarndyce always refusing to be thanked: 'I felt that if we had been at all demonstrative, he would have run away in a moment.' (*BH* ch6 p112) She does not judge him by herself, and so fails to notice that she also, for all her desire to be loved, discounts the praise that others heap upon her, dismissing it as a 'conspiracy to keep me in a good humour'. (*BH* ch23 p379) The possibility which she never considers is that John Jarndyce's behaviour is, no less than hers, a stratagem for dealing with an impossible situation. She takes no account of his eccentric and erratic behaviour, the unresolved melancholy summed up in his talk

of the east wind, or his asceticism, and so it does not occur to her that he too might be afraid of hearing the hollow ring of self regard in his goodness.

> I have often spoken of his bright face, but I thought I had never seen it look so bright and good. There was a high happiness upon it, which made me think, 'he has been doing some great kindness this morning.'
>
> (*BH* ch62 pp892f)

Is John Jarndyce pursued by the terrifying thought that this is precisely the impression cultivated by a Pecksniff? We hear of no such doubts. Esther herself suspects nothing of the sort, and Jarndyce remains for her a personification of ideal and spontaneous goodness.

Esther's response, summed up positively in a determination to be industrious and make people love her, has its negative side in a determined self-suppression. She makes her wishes and interests subservient to those of others, and denies the strength and significance of her own feelings. She uses the word *flutter* to describe her feelings – a contribution to the recurrent bird imagery in the book, and a device by which she minimises the significance of her own emotions. Guppy's proposal leaves her 'all of a flutter', and when, for the first time, she is 'very angry indeed' (with Richard) she hastens to reduce her high emotion until, though still trembling, she can describe herself as merely 'rather fluttered after being so fiery'. (*BH* ch9 p178; ch45 p677) As though in response to an accusation, she assures us that when, in her first conversation with Allan Woodcourt after her disfigurement, the blood rushes to her face, it is 'only an instantaneous emotion' – a claim that is given the lie by what she says on the next page: 'I felt for my old self as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes.' (*BH* ch45 pp681f) The ultimate suppression of self is her willingness to marry John Jarndyce, a decision which she celebrates by burning the flowers that Allan Woodcourt gave her, an act of abnegation which not even her disease and disfigurement had driven her to. This self-suppression is a panic-reaction. At the least sign of what she thinks is selfishness, she is afraid of finding her goodness a sham, afraid that when little Esther glides along with her shadow beside her she will, like Mr Vholes, chill the seed in the ground.

Esther's circle of duty

Esther as a child has a 'noticing way ... a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better'. (*BH* ch3 p62) Here she is trying to understand her godmother better:

> She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the differences between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her – no, could never even love her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was, and how unworthy of her I was; and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better heart; and I talked it over very often with the dear old doll; but I never loved my godmother as I ought to have loved her, and as I felt I must have loved her if I had been a better girl.
>
> (*BH* ch3 p63)

After a general comment about her godmother, she goes on to describe how her godmother makes her feel, and then we find that she is no longer talking about her godmother at all, but about herself, and the child is taking upon herself all the responsibility for the failed relationship, as Nell takes responsibility for her grandfather's faults.

Esther tells us that she does not have a quick understanding, adding, 'When I love a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten. But even that may be my vanity.' (*BH* ch3 p63) Since most of Esther's narrative deals with people she loves tenderly, it isn't easy to judge whether she's right in saying her understanding is surer when she is dealing with them. She is quick to respond to John Jarndyce's reluctance to be praised and she realises early on that Ada and Richard are in love. (*BH* ch6 p112; ch9 p163) She is sharp at spotting those like Vholes and Skimpole who do wrong to those she loves. On the other hand she misinterprets Allan Woodcourt when he meets her on his return from sea, thinking he is merely sorry for her when in fact he loves her. (*BH* ch45 p680; ch50 p742) She fails to realise that Ada and Richard have actually married, for which she reproaches herself, thinking that she must be 'less amiable' than she would like to be – by which she means less self-forgetful, less entirely absorbed in the lives of others. (*BH* ch50 p745)

Esther is reluctant to express her own opinions on the Jellyby household, quoting instead Richard's clever remark that Mrs Jellyby 'could see nothing nearer than Africa'. (*BH* ch4 p85) Her own judgement is expressed in her actions – she looks after Peepy, speaks sensibly to Caddy, and tidies the room. (*BH* ch4) Affectionate, useful and neat, but reluctant to voice her own opinion, she is marking out a little life for herself. When she is given the housekeeping keys of Bleak House and enters into a silent understanding with John Jarndyce about Ada and Richard her future role is defined more clearly. (*BH* ch6 pp118 & 123) It requires her to dismiss as selfish all 'shadowy speculations' about her own past. She gets up from the fire (where dreamers like Paul Dombey and Lizzie Hexam feed their imagination) and recalls herself to her duty. (*BH* ch6 p131) Her new hopefulness is reflected, in subsequent chapters, by a gradually growing confidence in her own judgement.

She concludes her apology for not collaborating with Mrs Pardiggle (an apology which is also an implied criticism) by saying that, starting with those immediately around her she would let her 'circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself'. (*BH* ch8 p154) This is what happens as the novel proceeds. She has already followed the lead of her affections so far as to include the Jellyby children within the circle of her duties, and she goes on to encompass George and Gridley, Miss Flite, Charley and her brother and sister, Boythorn, and Jo the crossing-sweeper. Even within this circle, the temptation to wholesale charity is resisted. In the chaos of the Jellyby home, Esther concentrates her efforts upon two of the children – Peepy, the youngest, physically most vulnerable, but otherwise less spoilt by his upbringing, more capable of reclamation, and Caddy, who is in immediate danger from the threatened marriage to her mother's favourite. The restriction of interest could be merely a matter of narrative economy, relieving the reader of the burden of knowing the names and little destinies of all the Jellyby brood, but it is, in fact, the practice followed by Esther throughout. Krook is unsalvageable. Mr Vholes's daughters in their damp cottage elicit no sympathy. Hortense is turned away. Harold Skimpole, after Esther's initial error in helping to pay off his debt, remains

outside the circle. These exceptions emphasise that the principle of limitation is essential to Dickens's approach to charity, a principle containing an element of Calvinist exclusiveness, but also an element of commonsense: the home cannot take everyone in.

Although Esther's circle of duty expands steadily, it retains its domestic aspect: assisting at death-beds, looking after neglected children, sewing, tidying up, making things cheerful. Meeting Mrs Jellyby's public spirited colleagues at Caddy's wedding, Esther notes their lack of sympathy with the occasion, and comments sarcastically:

> Such a mean mission as the domestic mission, was the very last thing to be endured among them; indeed, Miss Wisk informed us, with great indignation, before we sat down to breakfast, that the idea of a woman's mission lying chiefly in the narrow sphere of Home was an outrageous slander on the part of her Tyrant, Man.
> (*BH* ch30 p479)

Esther, by her practice, shows us that the narrow sphere of home can be enlarged without requiring that, as Miss Wisk would have us believe, woman's mission should be man's mission. (*BH* ch30 p478) The point is made by Ruskin –

> ... what the woman is to be within her gates, as the centre of order, the balm of distress, and the mirror of beauty; that she is also to be without her gates, where order is more difficult, distress more imminent, loveliness more rare.
> (*Sesame and Lilies* §86: *Works* vol18 p136)

– and from a different angle by George Eliot in the contrast between Maggie and Tom Tulliver: Maggie's feelings and moral insights are more strongly developed because she lacks Tom's power to 'do something in the world'.[14] The danger is that a woman's narrower sphere of action will correspondingly narrow her insights. Esther sees through hypocrisy such as that of Mr Turveydrop and Mrs Chadband with the sharpness of a child. (*BH* ch23 p382; ch24 p401) Domestic and childlike – it is a short step from this to suggesting that Esther is narrow-minded, even philistine.

The point at which she is most open to a charge of philistinism is when she criticises Richard's education. Mr Jarndyce blames the Chancery case for Richard's difficulty in fixing upon a career, but Esther, while agreeing with him, offers an

14 *The Mill on the Floss* V 5.

additional explanation (admitting for the first time that she might, in some things, see further than her guardian, with his single idea). Conceding that she knows nothing of the subject, she delivers an attack on Richard's literary education, which she sums up dismissively as learning 'to make Latin Verses of several sorts'. (*BH* ch13 p218) The thrust of her attack is not against the literary content of Richard's education but against its wholesale approach. The system 'had addressed him in exactly the same manner as it had addressed hundreds of other boys, all varying in character and capacity'. (*BH* ch17 p280) This is the same as her criticism of Mrs Pardiggle's charitable work, and also echoes one of the criticisms that Dickens has to make of the Blimber method: 'No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Dr Blimber made him bear to a pattern, somehow or other.' (*D&S* ch11 p206)[15] Nobody understood Richard well enough to see that what he needed was practice in overcoming difficulties and sticking to uncongenial tasks. It would be unrealistic to demand that schoolteachers should have the sort of intense interest in each child that Esther has in Richard, but this is not the only alternative to the wholesale approach that she is criticising. It requires no more than the ordinary commonsense of a woman like Mrs Bayham Badger to notice Richard's dangerous lack of commitment. (*BH* ch17 p282)

When Miss Flite praises the English honours system, Esther tells us that 'there were moments when she was very mad indeed'. (*BH* ch35 p557) There is something wrong about this exchange. It is not that Esther is being made to speak

---

15 One of the individual characteristics which the Blimbers ignore in their treatment of Paul is his 'impulse of affection ... He could not bear to think that they would be quite indifferent to him when he was gone.' (*D&S* ch14 p254) At Esther's school, her impulse of affection, far from being ignored, was encouraged and (one might almost say, though Dickens would not have agreed, I think) actually exploited. She was given the role of making the other girls love her. Those who feel that she displays an over-active longing for affection might say, therefore, that her happy days at Greenleaf exemplify her criticism of Richard's schooling, in that a good quality was over-developed and made into her master when it should have been her servant.

The second important criticism of the Blimber method is that it makes the boys old before their time and deprives them of their childhood. Dickens perhaps obscures his criticisms, in *Dombey and Son* as in *Bleak House*, by throwing custard pies at the classics: 'None of your live languages for Miss Blimber. They must be dead – stone dead – and then Miss Blimber dug them up like a Ghoul.' (*D&S* ch11 p207) But then, a satirist is bound to address himself to attacking the occupying power, and, so far as mid-nineteenth century schools were concerned, the classics were the occupying power.

out of character and express Dickens's view of the matter: this rather trite and censorious generalisation is precisely the sort of comment she would make when straying beyond the circle of her sympathies into the outer world of political small-talk. For the most part, her small, sharp observations and her domestic emotions complement the wide rhetorical gestures of the third-person narrator, but here her contribution is disappointing. What she says is consistent with the main thrust of the political argument, but when you have built your indictment of society on the evidence of Chancery, Tom-all-alone's, Sir Leicester Dedlock and Mr Tulkinghorn, it seems unnecessary to the point of absurdity to add an accusation about the unfairness of an honours system that ignores the truly good while decorating the warlike and the very rich.[16]

Esther is not at her best when dealing with public issues. But that she is someone who is capable of independent, if not original, thought is important. In answering Mr Jarndyce's proposal, she has to weigh many imponderables – her feelings of gratitude, her lost looks, her shameful birth, the 'something for which there was no name or distinct idea' that was 'indefinitely lost to me' (*BH* ch44 p668), the sly suggestions of Mrs Woodcourt – with all these pressures against her we have to think her capable of mental self-reliance, if we are not to hold Mr Jarndyce guilty of taking advantage of her. And, amidst so many false reasons, Esther's commonsense actually lights upon the crucial reason which is almost a good reason for the decision she takes:

> I thought, all at once, if my guardian had married someone else, how should I have felt, and what should I have done! That would have been a change indeed. It presented my life in such a new and blank form, that I rang my housekeeping keys and gave them a kiss before I laid them down in their basket again.
>
> (*BH* ch44 p668)

We might deplore her choice of housekeeping and abandonment of love (kissing the keys, and burning the flowers), but she has taken it for reasons of her own, not merely from self-denying gratitude.

---

16 The same might be said about the Boodle and Noodle episodes. They are funny and one can see why Dickens wants to include the do-nothing political establishment in his indictment of society, but they tend to trivialise the strong and bitter representation of Chancery and Tom-all-alone's.

Esther's housekeeping

Esther's capacity for noticing things is as acute as ever when it comes to money. She hears the chink when Mr Jarndyce gives money to Mrs Skimpole and picks up something in the manner of Skimpole's servant which makes it clear that the girl associates Mr Jarndyce with the receipt of her wages. (*BH* ch43 pp650ff) Is it affection for Mr Jarndyce or affection for money that has quickened her apprehension here? It is hard to describe these traits without making them seem unattractive, but this is unfair to her. She exemplifies the rational attitude to money, neither grasping nor careless. Her first action as housekeeper is a generous mistake, helping Richard pay off Harold Skimpole's debt. Indeed, it would be fairer to say that Richard helps her, since her contribution is larger than his, not only in money terms, but also in terms of what it represents: her fifteen pounds is her savings from her quarterly allowances, while his ten pounds was simply 'received from Mr Kenge'. (*BH* ch6 p126) Years of saving ensure that she understands the value of money; her willingness to sacrifice her savings shows that she does not set its value too high.

The contrast between Richard's carelessness and Esther's carefulness is taken further in the ensuing clash between Skimpole and Neckett the bailiff's man. On one side is Skimpole, idly fantasising about the 'lights and shadows ... passing across the fields', on the other Neckett, sordidly poor, aggressively asserting his almost bestial condition: '"Think! I've got enough to do, and little enough to get for it, without thinking. Thinking!" (with profound contempt).' (*BH* ch6 p127) It is perhaps Skimpole's whimsical picture that later helps Esther to see Vholes's shadow chilling the seed: Vholes's pursuit of Richard and Neckett's pursuit of Skimpole are two aspects of the recurrent opposition between those who do and those who do not accept the reality of money.

When Richard argues that because he has been persuaded not to give the brickworker five pounds he can afford four pounds for a good rattle to London, and remain a pound better off, his mistake is so basic that it is almost as though

money is, as Skimpole suggests, a kind of language, like Moorish, of which Richard has not yet grasped the basic grammar. (*BH* ch9 p165; ch43 p652) Esther understands the language very well. She doesn't repeat the solecism of lending to Skimpole, and would not thoughtlessly give five pounds to the undeserving brickmakers – although she does give them her handkerchief. 'There never was such a Dame Durden ... for making money last,' says Mr Jarndyce. (*BH* ch62 p892)

Kissing the keys, even if we valiantly ignore the sexual suggestions, remains an ambiguous action. Do the keys represent imprisonment or power? On the surface they represent power, since they are keys for Esther to lock things up with, rather than keys that will lock her up. She herself sees neither of these sinister meanings – for her they are bells, symbols of hope. After her illness she uses her keys to ring herself in, 'as if I had been a new year, with a merry little peal'. (*BH* ch38 p592) Typically, the small hint of self-glorification contained in the comparison with the new year is immediately counteracted by the reminder that her keys produce only a little peal. The keys represent the domestic mission, and their ambiguity suggests the ambiguity of Esther's new position.

In the beginning Esther adopts a playful attitude to her housekeeping activity – 'a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person ... installed into the responsibility of the tea-pot ...' (*BH* ch8 p142) She continues to avoid appearing to take it seriously. Before Guppy's proposal of marriage she is engaged on 'adding up columns, paying money, filing receipts, and I dare say making a great bustle about it', and the bantering manner helps her to underplay the emotional impact of this event. (*BH* ch9 p173) She is confident enough of her own competence to pass on her methods to Caddy Jellyby, but even here she takes care to belittle herself by adding, 'and all my fidgety ways'. (*BH* ch30 p474) Like the ringing keys, these glimpses of the accounts are hardly more than background to her real function at Bleak House, which is a sort of emotional housekeeping, keeping the others happy, being the 'good little woman of our lives'. (*BH* ch8 p147)

We learn very little about the major business of the mistress of a house, dealing with servants. Esther says nothing about the maid who brings her the keys, not even whether she is pretty or not, which, considering her usual interest in girls' looks, is surprising. (*BH* ch6 p118) When she goes on her rounds with the servants on her first morning, she says only that they are 'attentive'. (*BH* ch8 p142) For all her diffidence about her new responsibility, she has no hesitation in telling the servants what to do. (*BH* ch8 p143) There is no suggestion that she is unkind or unfair but Esther, who is so sensitive to the feelings of others, shows no inkling that these servants might have feelings about their new mistress – whether nervousness, resentment, curiosity or sympathy.

This may point to a blind-spot in Dickens himself. He is quick enough to notice bad servants as Esther notices Mrs Jellyby's accident-prone 'person in pattens' or Skimpole's 'slatternly' servant (*BH* ch4 & ch43), and to see that bad employers make bad servants, as in the cases of David Copperfield and Pip, and Mrs Pocket, but perhaps, for him, the satisfactory servant is simply invisible, unless decidedly pretty like the Rokesmiths' Blackheath maid. Making the servants of Bleak House visible would also present a difficult dilemma: either they would be bad servants, whom Esther could kindly take in hand, but this would reflect badly on Mr Jarndyce; or they would be good servants, perhaps along the lines of Mrs Rouncewell, in which case they would encroach on Esther's role.

There is the exceptional case of Charley. Whatever we say about the way Esther treats Charley, we have no reason to suppose that she treats the other servants in the same way. Her lively account of Charley, therefore, goes no way towards filling the gap that exists in the story of her housekeeping. Dickens does justice to the idiosyncratic relationship between Esther and Charley, a relationship which at every point betrays its origin in John Jarndyce's *gift*, but he has nothing to say about the plain economic relationship between Esther and the servants at Bleak House. Similarly, in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens has nothing to say about any of the employees of

Doyce & Clennam's factory except John Baptist, whose dependence upon Arthur is essentially non-economic.

Skimpole

In the third person narrative, the argument turns largely upon the presentation of the do-nothing, irresponsible élite, Chancery, Boodle, and the rest, for whom government begins and ends with jobs and pensions. In Esther's domestic narrative Skimpole occupies this position.

Always in debt, he takes and does what he likes, careless of the consequences for his family and friends. When Esther descends upon his house she comments on its untidiness and the broken lock and chain on the front door. (*BH* ch43 p650) She is as disapproving as Mrs Pardiggle among the brickmakers. Skimpole's recurrent claim is that 'I never know anything about money', from which it follows that he knows nothing about other factors that limit human life. He has 'no idea of time', and seems not to recognise constraints of space, as he contemplates with equanimity the prospect of all his daughters coming to live in his house with growing families. (*BH* ch18 p297; ch43 p654) 'The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!' says John Jarndyce, whose defence of his friend is that he is nothing more than a child, only fit to live in a 'habitable doll's house, with good board, and a few tin people to get into debt with'. (*BH* ch6 p130) Two questions are raised by the part Skimpole plays in the novel: is this defence true, and even if true, is it really a defence?

Where money on a large scale is always vague and foggy and dangerous, Dickens often brings us up against hard little figures, sums of money with real and restricted value. In *Bleak House* money, even on a small scale, has lost even this limited connection with reality. When Smallweed adds up the bill in the chop-house it comes across as a piece of nonsense (supporting Skimpole's contention that money is an outlandish language) rather than an account to be settled – and certainly he has no intention of settling it. Snagsby's half-crowns are vague in purpose and vague in effect. The sovereign which Lady Dedlock gives Jo rapidly

dwindles to nothing, and when Guppy throws him a penny we don't know whether he catches it. (*BH* ch19) The practical Inspector Bucket is precise enough about counting out Sir Leicester's money for his 'expenses'[17] but even he has a liking for naming large and random sums:

> I'd give a hundred pound an hour to have got the start of the present time. ... Eight or ten hours, worth as I tell you a hundred pound apiece. ... When one strikes, there's another hour gone; and it's worth a thousand pound now, instead of a hundred.
>
> (*BH* ch56 p823)

But it is Skimpole who does most to undermine the currency, with his consistent refusal to recognise the connection between a sum of money and any idea of value.

> 'I don't know. Some pounds, odd shillings, and halfpence, I think were mentioned.'
>
> 'It's twenty-four pound, sixteen, and sevenpence ha'penny,' observed the stranger. 'That's wot it is.'
>
> 'And it sounds – somehow it sounds,' said Skimpole, 'like a small sum?'
>
> (*BH* ch7 p124)

> I suppose it will cost money? Shillings perhaps? Or pounds?
>
> (*BH* ch15 p258)

> ... he took a handful of loose silver and halfpence from his pocket, 'there's so much money. I have not the power of counting. Call it four and ninepence – call it four pound nine.'
>
> (*BH* ch37 p586)

> ... something and fourpence was the amount; I forget the pounds and shillings, but I know it ended with fourpence ... odd that I could owe anybody fourpence.
>
> (*BH* ch37 p588)

These remarks are funny, but they are more like a man who is laughing at the world than one who is laughing at himself. One of the little jokes goes on: 'I daresay I owe as much as good-natured people will let me owe. If they don't stop, why should I?' which sounds like cynicism. (*BH* ch37 p586) But he speaks with such charm and gaiety that his audience cannot believe he is exploiting them. In his presence Esther finds it hard to distrust him, but when he is not present she

---

17 *BH* ch56 p820. 'Expenses' here means, principally, bribery. Every so often as they are out looking for Lady Dedlock, Esther hears the chink of money. (*BH* ch57 p829) There is the faintest suggestion of disapproval, not of Bucket, but of the world that demands these little bribes.

doubts his artlessness.[18] Sensing that Esther is hostile to him, he speaks sharply of her as 'the very touchstone of responsibility', adding with guilelessly open cynicism: 'Live upon your practical wisdom, and let us live upon you!' (*BH* ch43 p654)

Like Esther he refers to himself in the third person by name:

> .. what Harold Skimpole was, Harold Skimpole had found himself, to his considerable surprise, when he first made his own acquaintance; he had accepted himself with all his failings, and had thought it sound philosophy to make the best of the bargain ...
>
> (*BH* ch31 p492)

While Esther addresses herself in tones of moral exhortation, Skimpole seems to regard himself as someone in whom he has only accidental interest, accepting his own faults as though they were 'a curious little fact about somebody else'. (*BH* ch37 p586) This is a mere parody of self-knowledge, resembling the vices of James Harthouse and Henry Gowan:

> This vicious assumption of honesty in dishonesty – a vice so dangerous, so deadly and so common ...
>
> (*HT* II 2 p162)

> The habit ... of seeking some sort of recompense in the discontented boast of being disappointed, is a habit fraught with degeneracy. A certain idle carelessness and recklessness of consistency soon comes of it.
>
> (*LD* II 6 p540)

We are in the conceptually difficult area, which Dickens regularly haunts, where self-deception and hypocrisy meet.

Esther recognises that her guardian must find Skimpole a pleasant contrast with Mrs Jellyby's circle,

> where charity was assumed, as a regular uniform, by loud professors and speculators in cheap notoriety, vehement in profession, restless and vain in action, servile in the last degree of meanness to the great, adulatory of one another, and intolerable to those who were anxious quietly to help the weak from falling ...
>
> (*BH* ch15 p256)

---

[18] At least I assume that this is what she must mean, but the wording is obscure: '[Skimpole's] helpless kind of candour ... combined with the delightful ease of everything he said exactly to make out my guardian's case [in favour of Skimpole's artlessness]. The more I saw of him, the more unlikely it seemed to me, when he was present, that he could design, conceal, or influence anything; and yet the less likely that appeared when he was not present ...' (*BH* ch43 p653) Perhaps this clumsiness of expression is intended to show Esther's hesitation about disagreeing with her guardian.

What John Jarndyce doesn't consider is that Skimpole's carelessness might be as un-candid as the vehemence of the others. Esther picks up the words *professors* and *profession* in this passage:

> It seemed to me, that his off-hand professions of childishness and carelessness were a great relief to my guardian, by contrast with such things, and were the more readily believed in; since, to find one perfectly undesigning and candid man, among many opposites, could not fail to give him pleasure. I should be sorry to imply that Mr Skimpole divined this, and was politic: I really never understood him well enough to know. What he was to my guardian, he certainly was to the rest of the world.
>
> (*BH* ch15 p257)

She attributes her inability to answer the question of Skimpole's sincerity to the difficulty of getting behind his consistent front. Dickens acknowledges the genuine childishness of Matthew Bagnet and George, 'simple and unaccustomed children in all the Smallweedy affairs of life', as an attractive and good trait, and also a trait that is recognisable. (*BH* ch34 p534) We cannot say in general terms what makes the old soldiers' childishness unequivocally authentic, and Skimpole's not, but there is no doubt that we do recognise the authentic cases. One pointed difference between George and Skimpole is that George is *not* the same to everybody. We see him being gentle with Charley within a few minutes of being very rough with Old Smallweed. So, if Esther is looking for the moment of inconsistency that will show up Skimpole's hypocrisy, this will still not be conclusive, since inconsistency can be a mark of authenticity, and the greatest hypocrite is the one whose performance is most watertight.

Esther's suspicions grow more definite –

> I thought I could understand how such a nature as my guardian's, experienced in the world, and forced to contemplate the miserable evasions and contentions of the family misfortune, found an immense relief in Mr Skimpole's avowal of his weaknesses and display of guileless candour; but I could not satisfy myself that it was as artless as it seemed; or that it did not serve Mr Skimpole's idle turn quite as well as any other part, and with less trouble.
>
> (*BH* ch37 p578)

– but she cannot bring herself to take the abrupt line of the less squeamish Bucket. Having described how he tempted Skimpole with a fypunnote, and how Skimpole, while professing not to know the value of it, accepted the bribe and revealed where Jo was sleeping, Bucket gives Esther some advice:

> Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it, if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' you can consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One. Now, I am not a poetical man myself ... but I'm a practical one, and that's my experience.
>
> (*BH* ch57 p832)

This is not the first revelation that Skimpole can be bribed. Earlier on he admits, 'with his frankest smile' to having accepted another five pound note as commission for introducing Richard to Vholes: 'Was it a five-pound note? Do you know, I think it must have been a five-pound note!' (*BH* ch37 p589) Esther is pointedly not saying that this is a frank admission, and any doubts that she thus raises are emphasised when she reports the bribe to Mr Jarndyce, who relieves his initial vexation at the news by taking the admission as proof of innocence. (*BH* ch43 p649) Did Skimpole count on this reaction?

Esther's own comment on Skimpole's betrayal of Jo, that it 'passe[s] the usual bounds of his childish innocence', shows that she is no longer concerned with the sincerity or otherwise of his professions. (*BH* ch57 p832) Skimpole's carelessness and irresponsibility are condemned by this outrageous action, and the excuse of being a mere child, even if true, is simply irrelevant.

The full shocking quality of Skimpole's betrayal of Jo is not revealed in the account of the bribe. To appreciate Dickens's antipathy we must look back at Skimpole's initial reaction to Jo's arrival at Bleak House. Jarndyce asks him what they should do in this 'sorrowful case', and Skimpole says they had better turn him out. As a former medical man he recognises the dangerous fever that Jo is carrying. (*BH* ch31 p489) In Dickens's scheme of morality the voice of the innocent fool, exemplified by Mr Dick in *David Copperfield*,[19] is the voice of instinctive moral insight, but here Skimpole is casting the vote of the innocent fool on what is plainly the wrong side. Even Mr Jarndyce is indignant as well as amused. Skimpole accompanies his recommendation with remarks about Esther's 'practical good sense' and 'knowledge of detail, and ... capacity for the administration of detail'

[19] The contrast with Mr Dick's advice in the almost parallel situation (not quite the same, of course, because David, though dirty, is not obviously contagious) is evident.

and a further demonstration and admission of his own childishness: 'Give him sixpence, or five shillings, or five pound ten – you are arithmeticians, and I am not – and get rid of him!' (*BH* ch31 p489ff) The mock admiring, but really contemptuous, reference to arithmeticians reminds us that Skimpole is using much of Dickens's own rhetoric, but using it in a bad cause. Esther points out that while they are arguing, Jo is getting worse, and Skimpole briskly replies that they should turn him out before he gets still worse. Esther says: 'The amiable face with which he said it, I think I shall never forget.' (*BH* ch31 p490) Nor can we forget that he spends the rest of the evening playing a sentimental ballad of a boy 'bereft of his parents, bereft of a home'. (*BH* ch31 p492)

Conclusion

It is not only the character of innocent fool that Skimpole lets down by his advice to get rid of Jo. He also fails to live up to his character and obligations as a doctor. The good doctor is fundamental to Dickens's view of how the social problems of Tom-all-alone's are to be dealt with. Skimpole shows that this is no mechanical solution – you cannot simply train doctors and draft them in to clean up the slums – there are personal qualities of responsibility that are required and which cannot be got by a medical training alone. And just as Skimpole undermines our reliance on the central positive ideas of the innocent fool and the good doctor, so also he calls into question the idea of the good housekeeper. For in his assessment of the consequence of taking Jo into Bleak House, he is absolutely right. It is disastrous. It is Esther with her keys who opens up the home to danger, while Skimpole, who has allowed the lock and chain of his own front door to fall into disrepair, is the one who tries his best to keep the danger out.

We see three forms of private benevolence, Jarndyce with his money, Allan with his skill and Esther with her sympathy, but on the problems of Tom-all-alone's they hardly make more of an impression than Snagsby's half-crowns. Dickens's answers to social problems on that scale are first of all the new beginning offered by the new Bleak House, and then effective policing and sanitary control for the

irredeemable underclass – in other words, the Bucket solution, flippantly endorsed by Skimpole, of *moving on*. Containing as it does Dickens's most effective imaginative dramatization of his two favoured models of social action, the benefactor and the home, *Bleak House* also highlights their inadequacy: they cannot safely take Jo into the home.

Chapter 6: What's wrong with Coketown?

The Preston lockout of 1854 made an industrial novel timely. In that year Dickens wrote two articles for *Household Words* making clear his views on the relations between masters and men.[1] With the prominence given to the external agitator, Slackbridge, the novel is less favourable to trades union democracy than the articles, but there are clear parallels. 'On Strike' opens with a conversation between Dickens and a gentleman on the train who combines features of both Gradgrind and Bounderby in the novel. Dickens expresses the view that

> ... into all the relations between employers and employed, as into all the relations of this life, there must enter something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance, and consideration; something which is not to be found in Mr M'Culloch's dictionary, and is not exactly stateable in figures ...
>
> ('On Strike' *HW* 11 February 1854, *MP* p424)

Not exactly stateable in figures is a dominant theme in the novel. The article also makes the same plea for leadership and mediation between the classes which is put in the mouth of Stephen Blackpool.

If it is seen as a response to social conflict the novel seems slightly off-target, and its dramatization of the political issues is curiously weak. Dickens says the interests of masters and men 'must be understood to be identical or must be destroyed',[2] and so one looks in *Hard Times* for a demonstration of this identity of interests and of how destruction follows upon a failure to see it. There is both conflict and reconciliation, but the protagonists are hardly satisfactory class representatives. Both Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool are too idiosyncratic to articulate the arguments of their respective classes. Although Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe are less extraordinary and more subtly defined, they do not represent protagonists in class struggle. Gradgrind is not a capitalist, and Sissy Jupe, circus girl turned household companion, is not a proletarian.[3]

---

1 'On Strike', 11 February1854; 'To Working Men', 7 October 1854.

2 'On Strike', *MP* p435.

3 Similarly, when Mr Dombey is humbled he sits down to dine not with the proletarian Toodles but the socially indeterminate Captain Cuttle and Sol Gills.

The social comment in *Hard Times* is less episodic than elsewhere, but, as elsewhere, while social conditions may set up the problem, it is individual goodness and badness that dictate the resolution. In the central money-scene where Louisa gives money to Stephen for his journey, Rachael says it is for his heart to decide whether to take it or not (*HT* II 6 p189), and altogether this most 'social' of Dickens's novels turns out to be about the human heart. There is perhaps a temptation to draw from the novel a banal lesson such as, 'Human goodness can resist social conditioning and economic limitations' – but this is less a conclusion to draw from the novel than its underlying assumption.

The Poor

The Coketown magnates arrogantly deny the careful economy of the poor, showing themselves, as the rich often are in Dickens, out of touch with realities which the poor cannot evade.

> [Stephen] lighted a candle, set out his little tea-board, got hot water from below, and brought in small portions of tea and sugar, a loaf and some butter, from the nearest shop. The bread was new and crusty, the butter fresh, and the sugar lump, of course – in fulfilment of the standard testimony of the Coketown magnates, that these people lived like princes, sir. Rachael made the tea (so large a party necessitated the borrowing of a cup) and the visitor enjoyed it mightily.
>
> (*HT* II 6 p186)

When *All the Year Round* seeks to engage the sympathy of its readers for the victims of the cotton famine, it concentrates on the plight of the upper working-class, who are losing their best parlour furniture.[4] Stephen and Rachael, though not the poorest of the poor, do not come into the rosewood cabinet category. A hint of condescension in the description, a suggestion that he and Rachael are like children playing at tea-parties with their small portions and borrowed cup, puts distance between them and the reader, but nonetheless Stephen's tea-board and familiar hospitable impulse prove his affinity with the comfortable reader.

The horse-riders, although they represent in many ways the antithesis of the Coketown ethic of work and profit, have too insecure a life to be indifferent to

---

4 'An Act of Mercy' Part 1, *AYR* 20 December 1862 p346.

money. Our first glimpse of Sleary is as a 'stout modern statue with a money-box at its elbow'. (*HT* I 3 p55) Taking the money at the door, 'in the extreme sharpness of his look out for base coin, Mr Kidderminster ... never saw anything but money'. (*HT*III 7 p296)

Sleary understands the value of a rich connection. He sees Sissy as a possible patron in the future, and after helping young Tom to escape he tells Gradgrind: 'if you'll only give a Horth-riding bethpeak, whenever you can, you'll more than balanthe the account.' (*HT* I 6 p82; III 8 p306) Gradgrind has been speaking of balancing the account by a 'handsome remuneration in money'. Certainly, there is money, involved, because that is what Gradgrind has to give and what the horse-riders need, but for Sleary there is more to ordering a Bespeak than just money. There is respect and gratitude involved, and both are necessary to balancing the account.

It is important to Sleary to make clear that he helped Tom for his own reasons: recognition of Gradgrind's goodness to Sissy, and resentment against Bounderby. (*HT* III 8 p305) Feeling that to accept any large reward would be to compromise himself he suggests a level of reward that is nicely balanced:

> I don't want money mythelf, Thquire; but Childerth ith a family man, and if you wath to like to offer him a five-pound note, it mightn't be unactheptable. Likewithe if you wath to thtand a collar for the dog, or a thet of bellth for the horthe, I thould be very glad to take 'em. Brandy and water I alwayth take. ... If you wouldn't think it going too far Thquire, to make a little thpread for the company at about three and thixth ahead, not reckoning Luth, it would make 'em happy.
>
> (*HT* III 8 p306)

The 'little spread' is hardly a typical Dickensian feast, in the manner of Scrooge relieving the Cratchits or the apparition in Dick Swiveller's sickroom:

> ... behold! there stood a strong man, with a mighty hamper, which, being hauled into the room and presently unpacked, disgorged such treasures of tea, and coffee, and wine, and rusks, and oranges, and grapes, and fowls ready trussed for boiling, and calves'-foot jelly, and arrow-root, and sago, and other delicate restoratives, that the small servant, who had never thought it possible that such things could be, except in shops, stood rooted to the spot in her one shoe, with her mouth and eyes watering in unison, and her power of speech quite gone. But not so ... the strong man who emptied the hamper, big as it was, in a twinkling; and not so the nice old lady, who appeared so suddenly that she might have come out of the hamper too (it was quite large enough) ... The whole of which appearances were so unexpected and bewildering, that Mr Swiveller, when he had taken two oranges and a little jelly, and

> had seen the strong man walk off with the empty basket, plainly leaving all that abundance for his use and benefit, was fain to lie down and fall asleep again, from sheer inability to entertain such wonders in his mind.
>
> (*OCS* ch66 p601).

Three and six per head is real money; mighty hampers, strong men and nice old ladies represent magic money.[5]

As Sleary converts Gradgrind's 'handsome remuneration' into three and six per head, so Stephen asks for two pounds for his journey rather than the indefinitely large banknote offered by Louisa. This is an amount which he thinks he might repay, and to refuse it would be to show himself 'wi'out reason and gratitude'. (*HT* II 6 p190) This pairing is important: Dickens sometimes seems to want to contrast the head and the heart, but here he emphasises that they march together.

While Stephen's reason and gratitude preserve him from contracting a large, indefinite obligation to Louisa, he succumbs to the lure of Tom's still more indefinite 'good turn' in the hope of which he loiters near the bank and brings suspicion on himself. Tom is using his class authority to exploit Stephen, an authority he possesses despite the weakness of character evident in his hurried speech, his preference for laying his trap in the dark, and the extraordinary manner in which 'he had wormed a finger ... through a button-hole of Stephen's coat, and was screwing that corner of the garment tight up, round and round'. (*HT* II 6 p191) Tom's way of getting hold of Stephen (in contrast with the inhibition which prevents Louisa, in the same episode, from laying loving hands on him) expresses his combination of insolence and inadequacy which we can see so clearly, but which Stephen cannot see. All Stephen sees is Tom's social position.

Stephen is Tom's victim, much as though he were a factory girl seduced by the young master. But how satisfactory is he as a class protagonist? Ruskin objects to him as a 'dramatic perfection instead of a characteristic example of an honest

---

5 Even in such a fairy-tale passage as this Dickens manages to insert a hard piece of observation. The Marchioness's belief that these things cannot exist outside shops, shows that like Skimpole she finds that buying and selling belong to an outlandish culture: in her case this is not through wilful innocence, but because she has been excluded from economic life.

working-man'.[6] Leavis finds sentimentality in the picture of Stephen's 'supremely edifying' patience.[7] Detractors such as Philip Hobsbaum are scathing about Stephen as victim: a man whose troubles are so plainly the result of his own perverse choices cannot serve as an indictment of the system under which he lives.[8] In different ways all these critics misrepresent Dickens's intention.

First, Stephen is not intended to be supremely edifying. He is a 'good power-loom weaver and a man of perfect integrity', but not 'a particularly intelligent man'. (*HT* I 10 p103) Dickens's use of a not particularly intelligent man as mouthpiece for his own views on the relations between the classes recalls his use of wise fools like Mr Dick and Joe Gargery to illuminate difficult points of human nature, although Stephen's commentary is more discursive, less intuitive than the insights of Mr Dick and Joe, and so less credible. The one moment when we feel sympathy for Bounderby is in his irritation with Stephen's habits of speech: '... this muddle (as you're so fond of calling it)'. (*HT* II 5 p181)

The problem is, Stephen's failings are not those we are prepared for. Mrs Gaskell's working men, such as the learned Job Legh with his pedantic vanity, and the outspoken and intelligent, obstinate and intolerant, Nicholas Higgins, have the sort of faults which fit our ready-made ideas of what is to be expected from their background. Stephen's faults are not like that. They are not really faults so much as an incapacity to deal with what life throws at him, the sort of ineptitude which Mrs Gaskell regards as contemptible in her character Boucher, 'an unskilful workman with a large family to support ... enraging his more sanguine and energetic neighbour by his want of what the latter called spirit'.[9] Like Higgins and Job, Boucher is a neatly packaged character. In Stephen we are challenged by the thought that such hopelessness in the face of life's problems can coexist with great dignity and the capacity to work well.

---

6 *Unto this Last* I, *Works* vol17 p31.
7 *Dickens the Novelist* ch4 p261.
8 *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* ch16 p183.
9 *North & South* ch19.

Stephen's first mistake is to make an imprudent marriage, as young men of all classes are often tempted to do. Unlike David Copperfield, he is not released by death from the consequences of his choice. His nightmare temptation to poison his wife reminds us that literature, like the law, has one solution for a young gentleman hero, and another for the likes of Stephen. The second mistake is his refusal to join the union. The motivation for this is inadequate, or at best perfunctorily stated. Humphry House calls it 'inexplicable obstinacy', and refers Dickens's clumsiness to a reluctance to face the tragic insolubility of Stephen's predicament and to a more general hankering after a 'man-to-man' solution.[10] The explanation offered is that Stephen has made a promise to Rachael not to join the union, because it would be likely to get him into trouble. We are told nothing of the circumstances, and Stephen does not consider that changed circumstances might justify going back on the promise – it is simply a solemn promise which is now 'gone fro me for ever'. (*HT* II 6 p189)

What other explanations might have been offered? Dickens might have made Stephen unable, or unwilling, because of his domestic entanglements, to increase the risk of losing his wages by involvement in union activities, but this would appear to compromise Stephen's character. The irony of his being sent to Coventry is heightened by the real solidarity which he feels with his workmates. Secondly, if Dickens had not insisted that the church and chapel play no part in Coketown affairs, he might have given Stephen more explicitly religious objections to union membership. However, either this would have committed Dickens to the uncongenial task of stating a plausible doctrinal objection to combining in trade unions, or else it would be no more satisfactory than the promise – it would be just as arbitrary for Dickens to make Stephen a member of a cranky sect as it is to have him keep a cranky promise.

Finally, Dickens could have given Stephen a substantial reason for objecting to the union, for example by referring to vitriol attacks on blacklegs. This would

10 *The Dickens World* p206.

amount to a plea for rational and moderate trades unions, and it is the line that would most closely dramatize the arguments in Dickens's *Household Words* articles. Probably Dickens preferred not to give gratuitous ammunition to those hostile to the operatives' cause, but there is also a more immediate reason for not taking this line. If the problem is that Stephen is refusing to join a *bad* union, his dilemma is no longer tragically insoluble: remove abuses in the union, and then he can join. If Stephen's objections to the union are made too cogent it can only serve to enhance the wickedness of his workmates, or else their stupidity in following Slackbridge. It is essential to the moral equilibrium of the situation, and to the irony of good men doing evil to a good man, that the other operatives should have justification for not understanding Stephen's obstinacy.

There is something to be said for the actual explanation. It relates to the central fact of Stephen's life, his frustrated love for Rachael, his superstitious dependence upon a woman who is stronger, more intelligent and better than he is, and whom he sees as a haloed saint. (*HT* I 13 p122) It does not depend upon the arbitrary fact that Slackbridge is so unspeakable. Stephen's reason is obscure enough to make the men's willingness to force 'private feeling [to] ... yield to the common cause' appear less monstrous. (*HT* II 4 p175) If the explanation still seems contrived and mechanical, perhaps this is as it should be. Stephen's story challenges us because his reason is so poor. No doubt we think he should not have been sent to Coventry and hounded to his death, but most of us feel that someone should have taken him aside and told him not to be such a fool. Dickens is challenging the Slackbridge in his readers, the part of our mind that is tempted to deny the force of conscientious objections which we do not understand, and which the holder of the objections cannot explain to us.

When Louisa visits Stephen's home it is her first direct contact with the Coketown Hands:

> Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little

> pinched when wheat was dear, and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielded such another percentage of crime, and such another percentage of pauperism; something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made; something that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again; this she knew the Coketown Hands to be. But, she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops.
>
> (*HT* II 6 p187)

The immediate significance of this passage is to point out the inadequacy of Louisa's abstract knowledge, but in its context it is clear that the Hands have indeed behaved according to the pattern laid down for them in Louisa's textbook, rising like the sea and doing some harm. Stephen has floundered against the laws of supply and demand (or is it rather against the facts of arbitrary power, since Bounderby, when he dismisses Stephen is acting not under economic compulsion, but out of malice?) and blundered into difficulty. His fate is an indictment of Coketown not because he is supremely good, but because he is a poor, weak, foolish man whom the system fails to understand and protect.

Bounderby

We never forget that Bounderby is rich, but it is not the most important thing about him. Pure money-makers, like Gride and Jonas Chuzzlewit, who want money simply for itself, are rare in life and in Dickens. On the other hand, Dickens often seems unclear about what the further motive for money-making is. For Ralph Nickleby and Mr Dombey he suggests abstract motives, power and pride. While he is plainly alive to the drive to acquire and accumulate, he seems not to grasp the logic with fuels it. Charlotte Brontë in *Shirley*, Mrs Gaskell in *North and South* and Charles Reade in *Put Yourself in His Place*, explain their manufacturers in terms of a drive to pay off inherited debts, coupled with heroic enjoyment of activity, risk and mastery. Although we see nothing of Rouncewell's business life, we can believe that he, like Robert Moore, John Thornton and Henry Little, has used his intelligence and exerted his will in the economic struggle. Bounderby, by contrast, is never commercially challenged, and he shows no intelligence. All he has to make him credible as a representative of the Coketown magnates is his huge ego.

Dickens intends him to be in some sense representative. The chapter entitled 'The Keynote' offers Coketown as a representative town, and Bounderby and his opinions are an important part of the picture. Stephen is dismissed in a chapter with the explicitly generalising title, 'Men and masters'. In *North and South* the manufacturers dine at each others' houses and we get a sense of their attitudes, habits and ways of speaking, much as we see the London financial class exposed at the Veneerings' dinner table. There is nothing like this in *Hard Times*. We see the Gradgrinds and the Bounderbys at home, but there are only a few shadowy, though telling, allusions to other members of their class, such as Nickits the bankrupt whose house Bounderby takes over, and who had 'no connection whatever with the improvident classes'. (*HT* II 7 p196) We are told that the Coketowners share Bounderby's stock of clichés: 'sooner pitch his property into the Atlantic'; 'why [don't] the sixty thousand nearest Hands ... each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence?' (*HT* II 1 pp146 & 152) As glimpses into the closed middle-class mind these gems are worthy of the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, but they do not amount to a substantial picture of the mind of the manufacturing class. These manufacturers do not, as Mrs Gaskell's do, discuss a class strategy, and it is left to the renegade aristocrat Mrs Sparsit to suggest that they should confront the combination of the workers with an equivalent show of class solidarity.

Like some other Dickensian hypocrites Bounderby straddles the thin line between humbug and madness. How satisfactory is it for Dickens to use a madman, a 'dramatic monster' as Ruskin calls him, as the vehicle for his attack? Ruskin's famous answer is that Dickens's chosen method is to 'speak in a circle of stage fire'.[11] This idea comes to mind repeatedly as we try to do justice to Dickens's ability to make a type come alive in a vivid individual, and make an extreme case embody the essential characteristics of a class. Leavis quotes from Santayana with approval:

> When people say that Dickens exaggerates, it seems to me that they can have no eyes and ears. They probably only have *notions* of what things and people are; they

[11] *Unto this Last* I, *Works* vol17 p31.

accept them conventionally, at their diplomatic value.
(quoted in *Dickens the Novelist* ch4 p260)

Taken at their diplomatic value the manufacturers of Coketown are sane enough, pursuing rational economic goals, educating their families according to their lights, dining out and celebrating their triumphs and making the best of their failures. This is how we see them in Mrs Gaskell. What Dickens does is to pick up the signals of madness coming from behind this façade, registering, as Leavis says, 'with the responsiveness of a genius of verbal expression what he so sharply sees and feels'.[12]

Humphry House claims to find an actual example of a real Bounderby documented in the Hammonds' *The Town Labourer*.[13] Even if true, an extreme individual case is not *representative* unless we can make a connection between Bounderby's mania and the common characteristics of the class as a whole. Philip Hobsbaum's discussion of Bounderby makes this connection: manic energy and denial of human relationships, the characteristics of Bounderby's madness, are precisely the characteristics that lead to success in a commercial society.[14] According to this view, Dickens has detected that successful manufacturers, even if smoother and more affable than Bounderby, inevitably share his essential inhumanity.

Dickens is making a more specific point when he uses monsters such as Squeers, Gamp and Bounderby as vehicles for social criticism, a point which has to do with his abiding concern with humbugs, from Bumble to Podsnap. Bounderby gives off a 'moral infection of claptrap' compelling people to accept his image of himself. (*HT* I 7 p84) He is a madman whom an essentially decent man like Gradgrind will welcome to his house and fireside, allow to kiss his young daughter, thank for favours done to his son, and finally accept as a son-in-law. It is not the

---

12 *Dickens the Novelist* ch4 p260.

13 *The Dickens World* p206; 'The Mule Spinners' Address to the Public' 1818, quoted in J. L. & B. Hammond, *The Town Labourer* (London, 1937) p324.

14 *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* pp179-182.

bare existence of a Squeers or a Gamp that constitutes the social evil: if it were, social evils would be more easily cured. The social evil consists of the willingness of ordinary sane people to accept these monsters, employ them and entrust their sick relatives or their children to them. While part of the significance of Bounderby is as an extreme example of his type and a dramatization of the vices of his class, an equally important point is that he is a monster whose evident monstrousness is overlooked by his ordinary, non-monstrous associates.

What we see of Bounderby is not his commercial and manufacturing activity, but his private life, his blustering, his humbug, his personal cruelty. When he emerges from domesticity he is, except for his dismissal of Stephen, seen as a banker, not a manufacturer. The description of the bank (*HT* II 1) shows Dickens on his home territory. The cutlasses and carbines 'arrayed in vengeful order' over the chimney contrast pointedly with their blunt and rusted counterparts in the Cheerybles' counting house. (*NN* ch37 p554) There is the association of gold and silver with paper and secrets, which we are familiar with from accounts of Ralph Nickleby and other Dickensian bankers and lawyers. As a manufacturer Bounderby might demand some credit for energy, resourcefulness and productiveness. Dickens believed that a manufacturer's interests and his employees' were ultimately identical, since for both money is real; economic transactions have real consequences. To represent the class conflict at its least soluble, a banker is a better representative man than a manufacturer. The banker deals in intangible money, paper and secrets, money at its most mysterious, powerful. and irresponsible. Indeed Bounderby displays an almost Skimpole-like vagueness about money when he tells Stephen that the cost of going to law would be 'from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound ... perhaps twice the money'. (*HT* I 11 p113) This is a harsh celebration of the unfairness of society, expressed in the indeterminate terms of the man who feels himself exempt from the constraints of economic life.

In the skit upon *Hard Times* by B R Brough[15] Bounderby's bank is represented as a fraud, and this is probably what most readers would expect of a bank in a socially aware novel. But Dickens avoids that line of attack. So far as we can tell, Bounderby is an honest businessman. Stephen's suffering is the result of no illegality on Bounderby's part. Bounderby's dishonesty towards Stephen is all on a personal level. Dismissing Stephen as a trouble-maker is cruel and arbitrary, but not dishonest. The dishonesty comes when Bounderby seeks to justify himself with a travesty of the view of Stephen's fellow-workmen:

> You are such a waspish, raspish, ill-conditioned chap ... that even your own Union, the men who know you best, will have nothing to do with you. I never thought those fellows could be right in anything; but I tell you what! I so far go along with them for a novelty, that *I'll* have nothing to do with you either.
>
> (*HT* II 5 pp182f)

He is exploiting his victim's 'baseless sense of shame and disgrace' with a cruelty reminiscent of his intention of taking the skin off Mrs Sparsit's nose. (*HT* II 4 p176; I 16 p139) In this speech, with its leaden, wounding jocularity, the ear overcomes our preconceptions and convinces us that Dickens has, for all the hyperbole, got the characterisation of Bounderby right.

Although Bounderby is both acquisitive and irrational, he is not irrationally acquisitive. The economic activity of the Coketowners as represented by Bounderby is neither illegitimate nor exceptional. Equally important, Coketown, in the period covered by the novel, is going through a prosperous phase. There is no unemployment or strike or lockout to intensify the suffering of the people. The inhumanity of the Coketown system and the suffering it causes cannot be blamed on any particular fault or breakdown. What we are seeing is its normal successful state. Either the faults are an essential and inescapable part of the Coketown system even at its most successful, or they are due to human failings of a more general nature.

---

15 '*Hard Times* (Refinished)' in Yates and Brough, *Our Miscellany*, 1857, quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* pp309-314.

Roughly speaking, while Ruskin takes the former line, Dickens tends towards the latter. For the most part Dickens's attack in *Hard Times* is directed against common human vices: humbug, the denial of childhood, the denial of imagination, and the harsh, inflexible view of human nature adopted by those who see abstractions where they should see fellow human beings. But this is not to say that Dickens has nothing to say about capitalism. Bounderby's prodigious capacity for humbug, while its primary function is to impose upon the world his image of himself as a self-made man, also has a social function. In the form of the magnates' fables about turtle soup and so on, Bounderby's humbug plays its part in the propaganda of the class war.

Bounderby uses the turtle-soup bogeyman to assert that any improvement in the workers' conditions would annihilate all distinction between workers and masters. For Bounderby's audience, his fellow employers, and for Dickens himself, suggestions of equality between masters and men would be self-evidently absurd. Dickens's point is that there is a difference between the workers seeking an improvement in their conditions (for example better housing conditions, which form the principal topic in 'To Working Men', or the free access to justice which Stephen asks for) and their seeking actual equality. There is wide room for improvement without approaching equality. As for another of the magnates' fictions, that any measure of government control would make it impossible for them to carry on their business, Dickens clearly believes that a considerable degree of control is compatible with successful capitalism. *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* argue regularly for work-safety measures to be imposed, and support initiatives such as savings banks and insurance schemes: they believe that capitalism can accommodate considerable improvements in the workers' lot without undermining the class distinctions on which the system is based.

Gradgrind

From the outset Dickens distinguishes Gradgrind from Bounderby.

> Mr Gradgrind, though hard enough, was by no means so rough a man as Mr Bounderby. His character was not unkind, all things considered; it might have been a very kind one indeed, if he had only made some round mistake in the arithmetic that balanced it, years ago.
>
> (*HT* I 5 p70)

Gradgrind has formed his own character in the same way as everything in Coketown is decided, by arithmetical calculation:

> So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and regulated actions. There is no mystery in it; there is an unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them, for ever. – Supposing we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown quantities by other means!
>
> (*HT* I 11 p108)

Among the examples of the elements in human nature which defy quantification is the drunken miner who resourcefully takes charge of the operation to rescue Stephen. (*HT* III 6 p286) Sissy's faith in Stephen's innocence is not based on calculation. (*HT* III 5 p275) Not that it is baseless, just that it is based upon something other than calculation, above all upon Rachael's faith.[16] Stephen Blackpool, of course, is the chief example of unfathomable mystery, the awful unknown quantity whose motives not even Dickens can make add up.

The comment on Mr Gradgrind goes further than saying merely that he would do better not to apply calculation to human nature. It says that he would do better to miscalculate, better to get it wrong, which is harder to accept. It is all very well to laugh at Mr Gradgrind for seeking to prove that the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist (*HT* II 12 p238), but it sometimes seems that Dickens wants to say that it's better to be a bad economist than a good one. If it is true, as the economist says, that giving relief to the poor actually makes their condition worse than if you spent your excess wealth on luxury and champagne, then this is at the very least a

---

16 Rachael sustains her own belief that Stephen is alive as well as innocent (or at least blocks out the idea that he has been killed) by counting high numbers – numbers, the main villains in the book, having here a kindly face, as Dickens reminds us again that the non-human has no intrinsic moral significance, only the meaning that people give it in their thoughts and actions. (*HT* III 5 p275)

challenge to the Good Samaritan. This might be put more strongly: the throwaway remark about proving the Good Samaritan to be a bad economist marks the front-line in the clash of cultures. The belief in an absolute obligation to assist a fellow human being in trouble is the kernel of Christianity which remains for Dickens after discarding all the husks of church government and theology; and the desire to apply rigorous science to the improvement of the lot of the poor is the noblest aspiration of Victorian progressivism. One strand in Dickens's writing on charity, his call to 'seize and save' the street children, can be seen as an attempt to combine the impulse of the Samaritan with the need to turn the unproductive poor into effective economic units.

Comparison with Ruskin throws light on Dickens's problem. Ruskin acknowledges that life and economics rest upon the ability to produce food from a limited amount of land, what Humphry House calls the 'ghastly ratios' of Malthus: 'Reach the limits of your feeding ground, and you must cease to multiply, must emigrate, or starve.' [17] Repeatedly, Ruskin's economic arguments start off by taking a plot of land and so many men to cultivate it, but whereas the Malthusian inevitably turns this into a morbid threat, Ruskin makes it sound like an opportunity. The piece of land which at first supports forty ignorant labourers goes on to support ten astronomers and geometers and only thirty ignorant labourers. The different tone is captured by the re-definition of production: 'Production does not consist in things laboriously made, but in things serviceably consumed.'[18] Purpose is at the root of economic activity, as though, when our forty men arrive on their piece of land, instead of going blindly to work to produce, and only then asking what is to be done with the product, they ask straightaway: Here is the land, how shall we use it? Another crucial conception in Ruskin's economic theory is the idea of the store, on which he bases his definitions of value and distribution. The store is finite, of course, but not necessarily meagre:

---

17 House, *The Dickens World* ch3 p75; Ruskin, *Time and Tide* XXII, *Works* vol17 p434.
18 *Unto this Last* IV, *Works* vol 17 p104.

> The world is so regulated by the laws of Providence, that a man's labour, well applied, is always amply sufficient to provide him during his life with all things needful to him, and not only with those, but with many pleasant objects of luxury; and yet farther, to procure him large intervals of healthful rest and serviceable leisure.
>
> (*Political Economy of Art* I, *Works* vol 16 p18)

In *Unto this Last* he says that while at some distant time the human race will be limited as the swallow is limited by the scarcity of gnats, that time has not yet been reached, and current poverty is due to unserviceable consumption of resources, not to absolute scarcity.[19] Dickens is not able, on the level of theory, to detach himself as Ruskin does from the prevailing ideology of scarcity. The world Dickens instinctively believes in is one of abundance, but unlike Ruskin he does not incorporate this feeling into the view of the world that he has when he thinks. The abundance emerges in the form of benefactors with unlimited bank-balances, and generosity sometimes seems to depend on a denial of reason. Some of Dickens's most impressive moments, including Sissy's clinging to the bottle of Nine Oils, arise from the confrontation between this generosity of feeling and the insoluble conundrums of Malthusian economics.

Unlike her belief in Stephen's innocence, Sissy's faith in her father is never confirmed, and cannot be confirmed, Sleary says, 'till we know how the dogth findth uth out!' (*HT* III 8 p308) It is a piece of 'wretched ignorance ... rejecting the superior comfort of knowing, on a sound arithmetical basis, that her father was an unnatural vagabond'. (*HT* I 9 p95) Her faith is the sort of 'mistake' that Gradgrind would have been better for making. It is not only that it is better to be the sort of person who doesn't base all judgements on actuarial calculations. The faith that is kept alive by the simple foolish act of keeping the Nine Oils, even if it is misplaced, makes Sissy a better person.

Mr Gradgrind realises that 'there was something in this girl which could hardly be set forth in tabular form' (*HT* I 14 p128), but doesn't see is that the same is true of himself. He is a dreamer. Like Louisa, and like other dreamers such as Paul

---

19 *Unto this Last* IV, *Works* vol 17 p105.

Dombey and Lizzie Hexam, he stares into the fire. (*HT* 5 p62) The name of his house points two ways: *Stone* is suggestive of hard facts, but *Lodge* is redolent of the retired merchant's dream of rural retreat. The famous passage in which Gradgrind declares his faith is precisely that, a declaration of faith, and is remarkably metaphorical:

> Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!
>
> (*HT* I 1 p47)

The government officer who objects to representations of quadrupeds walking down walls (*HT* I 2 p52) would also object to the suggestion that minds are gardens where facts can be planted. It is not an original metaphor, but it is the image on which the titles of the three parts of the novel are hung. The irony of making Gradgrind use the metaphor which contains in it the whole refutation of his system (if you plant facts, facts are all that will grow – facts like Bitzer and Tom, or like Louisa's marriage) is obvious enough, but we should also notice that Gradgrind shows that he is not the product of his own system. He is no Bitzer. His education neither rooted out metaphor nor forbade him to dream and speculate and form principles.

The system is essentially negative. It calls for nothing but facts, but doesn't call for all the facts. Gradgrind is selective. When discussing Bounderby's proposal of marriage he says there is nothing about it which is 'fanciful, fantastic or (I am using synonymous terms) sentimental'. (*HT* I 15 p133) In truth Bounderby is, in his revolting way, sentimental. We see him imposing a kiss upon a coldly compliant Louisa ('Always my pet; an't you Louisa?' (*HT* I 4 p64)) and this performance is evidently common enough for Tom to realise that Louisa might have influence over Bounderby. This is the fallacy of the nothing but facts school. Without something more than facts, without sympathy, for example, you will never gather together all the relevant facts.

Gradgrind is not self-seeking. Apart from his intention of making 'an arithmetical figure in Parliament' (*HT* I 3 p54) he is another Brownlow or Meagles, a retired businessman who takes an orphan into his home, doing his best to educate her according to his system. Looked at in the abstract, his philosophy is not necessarily a philosophy of acquisitiveness. There is nothing essentially inhuman in tables of statistics. Dickens describes his own journalistic method early in his career, in 'A Visit to Newgate': 'We took no notes, made no memoranda ... are unable to report of how many apartments the gaol is composed.' (*SB* p235) He always prefers the immediate and particular to the abstract and general. Nonetheless he was a reader of Blue Books, and commends the doctors of the Children's Hospital for keeping a record of living conditions in their vicinity, such as would provide the raw material for tabular statements of the sort derided in *Hard Times*. (*UC* XXXII p329)

It is, however, not accidental that the hard fact, statistical Gradgrind system appeals to the money-making class. The rhetoric of hard facts fits in well with their propaganda, and of all the quantities measured and tabulated in Mr Gradgrind's political arithmetic, money comes to hold a pre-eminent place .

> Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.
>
> (*HT* I 5 p66)

Stating things in figures and stating them in terms of money are readily seen as equivalent.

In the episodes involving Louisa and Harthouse a lot is made of their lack of motive. Louisa's curiously stilted words when discussing Bounderby's proposal (*HT* I 15 p136) make her seem a spectator of her own life, which, if we regard our decisions as matters of fact, is all we ever can be. Harthouse drifts, 'indifferent and purposeless' into what he does, whether taking to 'the serving out of red tape, or

the kindling of red fire'. (*HT* II 8 p207) He is a moral nihilist – 'we know it is all meaningless, and say so' (*HT* II 7 p195) – and Dickens insists that the Gradgrind philosophy is essentially the same:

> Why should [Louisa] be shocked or warned by this reiteration? It was not so unlike her father's principles, and her early training, that it need startle her. Where was the great difference between the two schools, when each chained her down to material realities, and inspired her with no faith in anything else? What was there in her soul for James Harthouse to destroy, which Thomas Gradgrind had nurtured there in its state of innocence!
>
> (*HT* II 7 p195)

There is all the difference in the world between the two men, between the devoted enthusiasm of Gradgrind and the self-absorbed indifference of Harthouse, but these are differences of quality, differences of character, the sort of difference Gradgrind denies.

Louisa and Harthouse are motiveless because they inhabit a world without values. Sissy puts her finger on the valueless world of the statistician:

> And he said, Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and a'n't you in a thriving state? ... I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all. ... Then Mr M'Choakumchild said he would try me again. And he said, This schoolroom is an immense town, and in it there are a million of inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are starved to death in the streets, in the course of a year. What is your remark on that proportion? And my remark was – for I couldn't think of a better one – that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong too. ... And I find (Mr M'Choakumchild said) that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long voyages, and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to death. What is the percentage? And I said ... it was nothing. ... Nothing ... to the relations and friends of the people who were killed. I shall never learn.
>
> (*HT* I 9 p97)

Here Sissy's third answer, that the percentage is nothing to the relations of those killed, seems a bit too clever, but the main point is clear enough. Mr M'Choakumchild is striving to extract value judgements from the figures: he wants Sissy to say that the nation is prosperous, that the figures of death from hunger or from burning and drowning are signs of progress, but she insists that it is only by connecting the figures with something else that any value judgements can be deduced.

This is where money comes in. Between fact and value, money faces both ways. On the one hand it is a proper object for arithmetic, it can be calculated, while on the other hand it has value. 'So much material wrought up, so much fuel consumed, so many powers worn out, so much money made.' (*HT* I 14 p126) Money is slipped in, just another statistic, but also the great justification of all the others. In such a system, money alone offers a motive. Tom, who has a mercenary interest in Louisa's marriage, is the only one who expresses a motive for wanting it. The calculations involved in the exploitation of the market are a paradigm of rationality, the use of reason to achieve a purpose, but they don't tell us what that purpose should be. The assumption is that our purpose is the maximisation of profit, and that our calculations will be, like Tom's, based upon the number one. By surreptitiously importing this assumption into their system, the political economists appear to have pulled off the trick of establishing rational value judgements in the world of pure facts.

When Mr Gradgrind appeals to Bitzer's heart not to have Tom arrested, Bitzer replies with a nugget of M'Choakumchild information about the circulation of the blood, and concludes that 'the whole social system is a question of self-interest. ... I was brought up in that catechism when I was very young, sir, as you are aware.' (*HT* III 8 p303) He sincerely (if that's the word) believes that he is doing nothing wrong. He knows all the arguments and is a pure product of the theory, but there is one thing which his training has taught him which isn't pure fact: it has taught him deference. He might regard deference to the powerful as reducible to self-interest: he withdraws it when Mr Gradgrind loses his power to do him good. However, deference is built into his way of speaking, and his way of knuckling his forehead is a habit like Uriah Heep's umbleness. We cannot say where the boundary lies between calculated and involuntary deference.

Tom also throws his father's teaching back in his face:

> So many people are employed in situations of trust: so many people out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can I help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort

yourself!

(*HT* III 7 p300)

This sounds more like sarcasm. Tom doesn't believe the doctrine. If Bitzer shows what happens when the Gradgrind education is successful in teaching the Gradgrind theory, Tom shows what happens when it fails.

> It was very remarkable that a young gentleman who had been brought up under one continuous system of unnatural restraint, should be a hypocrite; but it was certainly the case with Tom. It was very strange that a young gentleman who had never been left to his own guidance for five consecutive minutes, should be incapable at last of governing himself; but so it was with Tom. It was altogether unaccountable that a young gentleman whose imagination had been strangled in his cradle, should still be inconvenienced by its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities; but such a monster, beyond all doubt, was Tom.
>
> (*HT* II 3 p165)

Tom is an indictment not of the economic and social theory of his father, but of the educational method, of excessive restraint and interference, and the denial of imagination. We see an example of the excessive supervision in the incident of the horse-riding at the beginning, but on the whole the details of Tom's upbringing are left vague.[20] He is a poor spiritless child who gives himself up 'to be taken home like a machine'. (*HT*I 3 pp56f) He reacts against his education, but cannot see beyond it:

> I wish I could collect all the Facts we hear so much about ... and all the Figures, and all the people who found them out; and I wish I could put a thousand barrels of gunpowder under them, and blow them all up together! However, when I go to live with old Bounderby, I'll have my revenge. ... I mean, I'll enjoy myself a little, and go about and see something and hear something.
>
> (*HT* I 8 p92)

The thousand barrels of gunpowder, by which Tom tries to express his feelings, have the unmistakable ring of the schoolroom about them, and for the rest, his aspirations are entirely contentless – 'see something and hear something'. However diligently he calculates relative to number one, the ends of his calculations are unspecified. (*HT* I 9 p102 & 14 p127) At the circus all he sees is 'a hoof of the graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act,' and his adult debaucheries, his 'grovelling

---

20 At one point Mr Gradgrind finds Tom a foot taller than when he last took notice of him, and this suggests neglect rather than obsessive supervision. (*HT* I 14 p127) By this time Mr Gradgrind is an MP and so presumably away from home more often. However, Dickens's own children could testify to ways in which an energetic father might, even while distracted by public business, still find time to dominate his children's lives. See for example Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* pp751f.

sensualities', probably amount to little more. He is no match for the second-rate metropolitan rake, James Harthouse. The vagueness may be due to squeamishness in Dickens in the matter of manly dissipation, a squeamishness noticed, for example, by Mrs Oliphant,[21] but the impression is that Tom's wild life is a poor sort of thing – reminiscent of the description of his mother as 'an indifferently executed transparency ... without enough light behind it'. (*HT* I 4 p60)

The upshot of Tom's wildness is that he needs money. This is a traditional plot but with this difference: the young man in such a plot, if our sympathies are to be engaged by his downfall, should be a young man with good potentialities who is tempted and led into scrapes, like Arthur Pendennis, or John Carker. But Dickens never asks us to sympathise with Tom. Right from the outset he is contemptible. His calculations relative to number one are, from boyhood, based upon exploitation of his sister. He has been undone by his education, but the role of his education is not analogous to that of the evil companions and temptations which undo the promising young man in the traditional plot, nor to the mistakes in upbringing which are blamed for the wasted life of Steerforth or Sidney Carton. With them there is something potentially good to be corrupted, a *self* which could have gone either way. Tom's education has not corrupted a self that might otherwise have been good; it is what has created the self. His viciousness is the product of his upbringing, but knowing this does nothing to enlist our sympathy or forgiveness – there is nothing in him to forgive or sympathise with. If we want him to escape it is for his father's sake, not his.

The horse-riders

Leavis argues that if the portrayal of the horse-riders is taken as a realistic account of travelling circuses in general it is sentimental and false, but that as an account of the life-enhancing and humane qualities that are the ideal antithesis of Coketown it is true and unsentimental. Again Leavis distinguishes between the truth that

---

21 'Charles Dickens', *Blackwoods*, April 1855, quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* p328.

Dickens deals in and the conventional notions of what, say, circus-people in general are like. Without deluding himself over 'the nature of the actuality' of travelling circuses, Dickens finds in them 'the spectacle of triumphant activity.' To turn the 'game-eyed, brandy-soaked, flabby surfaced Mr Sleary' into a 'humane, anti-Utilitarian positive' is 'not sentimentality in Dickens, but genius'.[22]

Leavis's problem is that he wants to ascribe to the horse-riders the full status of an anti-Utilitarian ideal, and yet is unwilling to admit that cheap popular entertainment is the true antidote to Coketown. Just as we must be disappointed in Stephen if we assume he is meant to be an ideal figure, so we must feel some disquiet if we take the horse-riders as the essence of Dickens's response to Coketown. But if the horse-riders are not offered by Dickens as an ideal, the problem doesn't arise. By putting Dickens's positive remarks about the horse-riders in context we can avoid the two extremes into which Leavis falls, of idealising the horse-riders on the one hand, and, on the other, regarding them as an ugly and degraded background against which Sleary's humanity mysteriously flourishes.

Leavis quotes at length the description of Sleary's troupe, the 'two or three handsome young women' and their 'two or three husbands,' which conveys a sense of their informality, rakishness, their casual skill and daring, and their 'untiring readiness to help and pity one another'. (*HT* I 6 p77)

> Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, deserving, often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the everyday virtues of any class of people in the world.
>
> (*HT* I 6 p77)

Despite the rakishness, this is another of the unconventional homes, like the Peggotty boat-house or the Wooden Midshipman, where people take care of each other.

The horseriders' gentleness and sympathy arise from their way of life:

---

22 *Dickens the Novelist* ch4 pp258-261.

> Emma Gordon, in whothe lap you're a-lyin' at prethent, would be a mother to you, and Joth'phine would be a thithter to you. I don't pretend to be of the angel breed mythelf, and I don't thay but what, when you mith'd your tip, you'd find me cut up rough, and thwear a oath or two at you. But what I thay, Thquire, ith, that good tempered or bad tempered, I never did a horthe a injury yet, no more than thwearing at him went, and that I don't expect I shall begin otherwithe at my time of life, with a rider.
>
> (*HT* I 6 p80)

The willingness to treat Sissy as a daughter and sister, which Mr Gradgrind and Louisa learn over the years, comes naturally to the horse-riders. It is the other side of the casualness about family relations suggested by 'two or three handsome young women' and 'two or three husbands'. Sleary's promise to respect the members of his troupe is directly related to his professional respect for horses. While their way of life does not make them good, and in some ways might make them bad, it determines the sort of virtues they possess when they are good.

Sleary is a good man, and his horse-riding show is necessary for the life-starved inhabitants of Coketown, but these two facts are not immediately connected. It is not Sleary's goodness that the people need, but his fun. The fun he provides is not necessarily the best thing for them, but it answers the 'craving' that is produced by their long and monotonous labours. (*HT* I 5 p67) Dickens is always ambivalent towards popular entertainment. We cannot tell how good the Crummles' shows were, or how convincing Jarley's waxworks were. Dickens was aware of contemporary improvements in theatrical technique[23] and was notoriously and intensely interested in the theatre, but neither his understanding nor passion emerges in the novels. He seems content to rely on the long-running joke of describing the performance in terms that break the illusion.[24]

---

23 See 'Macready as Benedick', *MP* pp91-94.

24 Contrast Lucy Snowe on Vashti: 'It was a marvellous sight: a mighty Revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.' (*Villette* ch23) Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half-Sisters* offers an interesting contrast: the heroine Bianca makes the opposite choice to Sissy. She is adopted by a Sleary-like showman and stays with him to learn the trade before moving on and upwards through a progressively more cultivated acting profession. The domestic role for which Sissy opts is taken by Bianca's half-sister, the feebly romantic Alice.

Dickens is more seriously concerned about the moral impact of popular entertainment. In 'The Amusements of the People'[25]a personification of 'the people' under the name of Joe Whelks of Lambeth illustrates the point that the craving for amusement, relaxation and imaginative stimulation is an essential part of human nature. Joe doesn't read books, but is capable of understanding and enjoying a story in the theatre. Joe is contrasted with a Bitzer-like youth who has devoted his holidays to studying at a polytechnic, among 'cranks and cogwheels':

> We should be more disposed to trust him if he had been brought into occasional contact with a Maid and a Magpie; if he had made one or two diversions into the Forest of Bondy; or had even gone the length of a Christmas Pantomime.
>
> ('The Amusements of the People', *MP* p172))

Despite the suggestion that *any* contact with the world of imagination helps to broaden one's sympathies Dickens goes on to regret that at the end of the performance there is 'in the countenance of Mr Whelks a sufficient confusion between right and wrong for one night'. (*MP* p177) In words to be echoed by Sleary he says, 'The people who now resort here *will be* amused somewhere', and suggests that the pieces offered ought at least to have 'a good, plain, healthy purpose in them'. (*MP* p181)

Sleary's 'People mutht be amuthed' is criticised by John Lucas as 'feebly prescriptive'[26] but it seems to me to be both entirely within character and a fairly shrewd observation of fact. Certainly Dickens does underline the point in several places in the novel, but while a passage such as –

> Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog's-eared creeds, the poor you will have always with you.[27] Cultivate in them, while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament; or in the day of your triumph, when romance is utterly driven out of their souls, and they and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you!
>
> (*HT* II 6 p192)

---

25 *HW* March and April 1850, *MP* pp171-184.

26 *The Melancholy Man* p254.

27 This is used as a slogan for laissez-faire by Podsnap (*OMF* I 11 p188) whereas here it is a reason for urgent action.

– is undoubtedly prescriptive, it does not seem to me to be feebly so. There is a wide scale from mere amusement to the cultivation of the utmost graces of the fancies. Dickens wisely does not attempt to place Sleary on the scale.

Louisa and Sissy

As Leavis tries to decide whether the horse-riders stand for amusement and entertainment or imagination and art he sometimes seems to be in danger of turning them into an Ology after all. This seems wrong. They point to a lack in Coketown life and the Gradgrind system, and they suggest that it can be remedied by entertainment. Dickens, we have seen, regards popular entertainment as an essential but partial and flawed supplement to the life of work and to the particular sort of self-improvement offered by the Gradgrind Polytechnic. It is not the horse-riders who offer the final answer to Gradgrind and Coketown but Sissy Jupe. Sleary rescues Tom and trounces Bitzer (and through him Bounderby), but it is Sissy who rescues Louisa and redeems Mr Gradgrind. This suggests a division between the two sides of the plot. It cannot be made too hard and fast, since after all Sissy plays her part in getting Tom away from Coketown and Sleary's generosity undoubtedly has its effect on Mr Gradgrind, but there is a significant difference between two sets of characters: on the one hand there are Bounderby, Bitzer, Tom and Sleary, who are what they are and do not change (unless we take into account Tom's late repentance), and on the other Gradgrind, Louisa and Sissy, who grow and develop through the novel. Sleary deals with the unchangeable characters, while Sissy represents the possibility of spiritual growth.

Sissy is not an ordinary member of Sleary's troupe. The impression we have is that she and her father do not fit into the disorganized extended family of the circus, but make a little family of their own. Jupe's running away perhaps indicates that he feels there is a limit to the sympathy of the extended family. He has aspirations for Sissy and refuses to apprentice her. Accordingly she rejects the irregular domestic arrangements of the people she has grown up among and

chooses to go with Mr Gradgrind, believing that it is what her father would want. (*HT* I 6 p80) Dickens shows some delicacy here: he undoubtedly wants us to think Sissy is making the right decision, but he is equally determined to avoid suggesting disapproval of the horse-riders, and so he introduces one of Bounderby's characteristic explosions:

> 'Oh! indeed?' said Mr Gradgrind. ... 'I was not aware of its being the custom to apprentice young persons to –'
>
> 'Idleness,' Mr Bounderby put in with a loud laugh. 'No, by the Lord Harry! Nor I!' (*HT* I 6 p76)

By its crassness, this puts the horse-riders in a good light.

In her confrontation with Harthouse Sissy overcomes him by her 'child-like ingenuousness ... modest fearlessness, her truthfulness ... her entire forgetfulness of herself...' (*HT* III 2 p253) How does she come by this moral stature? Her two-sided upbringing enables Dickens to indicate the *ingredients* that have gone to the making of her. Her father, and later the Gradgrinds, have brought her into contact with the ideals of domesticity and self-improvement, while the easy-going sympathy of the horse-riders has protected her from the dangers of selfishness and narrowness inherent in these ideals. The naïveté that stood up to the teaching of M'Choakumchild also enables her to face Louisa's intended adultery without maidenly moral panic.

She has an impact on people. Tom feels she must hate him, which is the one occasion on which he moves beyond his own sense of grievance. (*HT* I 8 p91) Bitzer is instinctively hostile, and shows it by the uncharacteristic frivolity of making faces at her. (*HT* I 5 p69) Mr Gradgrind warms to her despite his theories. Mrs Gradgrind depends on her. The younger children, who know her best, love her. Louisa recognises Sissy's moral superiority: the only sign she gives of knowing that marrying Bounderby is wrong is her withdrawal from intimacy with Sissy. (*HT* I 15 p138) At the crisis of her life it is Sissy who draws her out of despair and grants her a sort of absolution (*HT* III 2 p248), in recognition of which she remains a lifelong emotional dependant of Sissy and her family – or, as Dickens puts it, 'happy Sissy's

happy children loving her'. (*HT* III 9 p313) Her future is one of service to others, to Sissy's children and the poor. She grows 'learned in childish lore' and tries to

> know her humbler fellow creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, and the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show, will be the Writing on the Wall – she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair; but simply as a duty to be done ...
>
> (*HT* III 9 p313)

The little outburst about fantastic vows and sisterhoods at the end of this passage, emphasises, like the unsympathetic treatment of the union orator Slackbridge, that Dickens is suspicious of joint action. He wants to distinguish between Louisa's activity and that of a Mrs Pardiggle, but it is not clear how her good works are organized. Would straightforward co-ordination of her activities with others amount to a 'fantastic vow'?

The other thing to notice is that Louisa is not attending to the material needs of the poor. Indeed they are not referred to as poor, but as humble. She is not taking soup or shoes (and especially not money, following the disaster of her gift to Stephen) but imaginative graces and delights. Dickens's attack is directed at the successful Coketown, not the Coketown that leaves people workless and starving. It is the importance of these non-material needs that Louisa has learnt from her suffering. During the discussion of Bounderby's proposal she asks:

> What do *I* know, father ... of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? ... The baby-preference that even I have heard of as common among children, has never had its innocent resting-place in my breast. You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear.
>
> (*HT* I 16 p136)

Deprived of crucial childhood experience, Louisa is now incapable of choosing a marriage partner. 'What does it matter?' she asks her father, and she comes close to saying the same when Harthouse offers himself. (*HT* II 9 p195) The education of the heart in childhood is necessary because one day the child will have to make serious choices. The dangers of over-protection are taken up again in *Our Mutual*

Friend, where Podsnap is always afraid his daughter will hear something to bring a blush to her cheek – but, unlike Gradgrind, Podsnap has no doctrine to put in the place of fairy-tales. The people of Coketown are described as 'babies who had been walking against time towards the infinite world ... portentous infants ... grown-up babies'. (*HT* I 8 p90) This is more than a protest against the patronising way in which do-gooding bodies talk down to the people: the implication is that, by being deprived of a natural childhood, the people are prevented from growing-up.

In Dickens, death and the home should evoke softened and softening emotions – for Pip even the edge of Tickler is softened as he walks home for his sister's funeral. (*GE* ch35 p298) But when Louisa goes home to her mother's death-bed she goes with 'a heavy hardened kind of sorrow upon her'. (*HT* II 9 p223) The opposition between hard and soft is crucial for Dickens's moral psychology, and it leads him into what often looks like, and occasionally really is, a weak vagueness on topics such as childhood, home and death. Here his analysis of Louisa's problem gives a clear idea of what he means by hardness and of how he believes the innocence and grace of childhood lay the foundation of the balanced adult mind:

> Remembrances of how she had journeyed to the little that she knew, by the enchanted roads of what she and millions of innocent creatures had hoped and imagined; of how, first coming upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy, she had seen it a beneficent god, deferring to gods as great as itself: not a grim Idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand and foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage – what had she to do with these? Her remembrances of home and childhood, were remembrances of the drying up of every spring and fountain in her young heart as it gushed out.
>
> (*HT* II 9 p223)

The importance of stories in the education of the heart and imagination is seen in *David Copperfield* and in accounts Dickens gives of his own childhood, for example in 'Dullborough Town' in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. In 'Chambers' the Uncommercial Traveller lists the child's first reading of *Robinson Crusoe* amongst the things that happen in a home and make it a true home. (*UT* XIV p146) The one chink in the gloom imposed by Gradgrind and M'Choakumchild is the preference for Defoe shown by the Coketown library-users, who persisted in wondering, and

would be amused. Apart from this reference to Defoe and a few glancing references to fairy stories Dickens gives little idea of what he thinks should be the content of popular literature. It sounds as though he is advocating romantic, exotic, escapist stories. His own magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* tended to favour stories and articles which were more realistic and closer to home, and in *American Notes* he praises the mill-girls who contribute to *The Lowell Offering* for writing about their own working lives and deriving from such material 'good doctrines of enlarged benevolence'. (*AN* ch4 pp117f)[28] No doubt he is calling for greater cultivation of the imagination and fantasy, but as always in Dickens we must be prepared for him to offer counter-examples to his most cherished ideas. Fantasy can be misused, as it is by the railway passengers who imagine the factories with their lights to be fairy palaces (*HT* I 10 p103) – a mistake that the Uncommercial Traveller himself makes when he visits the lead factory in 'On an Amateur Beat'. Mrs Sparsit exemplifies the misuse of fantasy, with her lurid speculations about Louisa and her gruesome 'allegorical fancy ... a mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom ...' (*HT* II 10 p227)

Louisa knows she is missing something. A 'struggling disposition to believe in a wider and nobler humanity' was implanted in her mind 'before her eminently practical father began to form it'. (*HT* II 7 p195). She never entirely surrenders her right to wonder. She questions Sissy about her father the clown 'with a strong, wild, wandering interest peculiar to her; an interest gone astray like a banished creature, and hiding in solitary places'. (*HT* I 9 p98) She retains something of the girl we first saw 'peeping with all her might' at the circus. (*HT* I 3 p56) Like other deprived children in Dickens, she never altogether loses her ability to ask for more.

Conclusion

There are three emblems of time in *Hard Times*. First there is Mr Gradgrind's clock which 'measured every second with a beat like a rap upon a coffin-lid' and

---

[28] Dickens's own writing, of course, tends to obliterate distinctions between the fantastic and the realistic, the domestic and the exotic.

'knocked every second on the head as it was born'. (*HT* I 15&16 pp132 & 142) There is the evocation of passing seasons, most notably in the three titles, Sowing, Reaping, Garnering. And lastly there is the fire, the greying ashes and the factory chimneys, telling Louisa that her life is short. The book ends with an appeal to the reader to strive for a future such as that embraced by Louisa, and reinforces it with the same reminder of mortality: 'We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.' (*HT* III 9 p314) There are certainly social messages in the book, comparable with Carlyle's apocalyptic warnings of social collapse, but at the end Dickens is offering an intensely personal motive for doing right, the satisfaction of having used our short lives well.

The book is about the money-making world, and money plays an important part. Stephen's poverty, Bounderby's power, Tom's crime, all have to do with money. But money is not the central theme. The fundamental social relationship of the industrial age, between capital and labour, provides the framework within which the action takes place, but it is not the decisive relationship. Bounderby as employer does little more than underline Stephen's outcast status. Stephen is destroyed first by his drunken wife, then by Slackbridge, and lastly by Tom. Economic inequality is built into the context, but it is underplayed. There is no attempt to portray substantial abuses of the system by the powerful. The resolution is purely personal: while we might toy with the idea of generalising the private role of a benefactor like the Cheerybles into a social prescription, we cannot begin to do so to the role played by Sissy in this novel.

For all these reasons *Hard Times* is not the book that we expect it to be. Is Dickens evading the social implications of his story, both in the statement of the problem and in the resolution? Why does his industrial fable not provide a more striking reinforcement of his known views on social division and social co-operation? It is comparatively easy to paint, as Dickens does in his journalism, the advantages of co-operation between classes and to assert the identity of interests of masters and men. In *Hard Times* he does something more difficult. He locates the

origins of the wolfishness that prevents the adoption of such an obvious solution in the strict moral neutrality of the hard facts ideology, which he equates with the moral nihilism of Harthouse. It prevents Louisa from falling in love, and Tom and Bitzer from feeling sympathy or gratitude. A system that stifles love, sympathy and gratitude plainly cannot generate social cohesion.

Chapter 7: Prisons and Humbug

Little Dorrit is, in addition to much else, a love story – one of the few love-stories in Dickens in which the partners have an equal claim upon our interest. Running through the gothic mystery and the social and political criticism is a delicate strand that tells of the coming together of Amy and the man she loves, from her first appearance, childlike, 'noiseless and shy ... conscious of being out of place among the three hard elders', to our last view of her at Arthur's side, 'inseparable and blessed', passing along in sunshine and shade while 'the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar'. (*LD* I 5 p93 & II 34 p895) This chapter will be mostly taken up with the arrogant, froward and vain, so it is worth pausing to remember the crucial moments in the love story: Amy's dramatic appearance at Arthur's door in answer to his exclamation, 'What have I found!' (*LD* I 13 p207); the painfully revealing fairy-tale that she tells Maggie about the tiny woman and the shadow (*LD* I 24 p341); her meeting with Pet, the woman whom Arthur thinks he loves; and her passionate offering of herself in the prison scenes at the end of the book. Arthur makes the same mistake as Walter Gay and David Copperfield, who try to treat the women who love them as sisters, but his case is more complex, involving delicacy over her poverty and dependence as well as his half-infatuation with Pet Meagles – but clearly it is partly based on his failure to see her as a sexual being. It is all very inexplicit, of course. When Arthur blames himself for not treating Amy from the start as a woman, he speaks of 'a woman whose true hand would raise me high above myself' – always thinking of her moral power rather than her sexuality. (*LD* II 29 p829)

Prison image and prison taint

Words like *inextricable* crop up when people are writing about *Little Dorrit*. John Holloway says that 'everything is related to everything',[1] and John Wain that the

1 Introduction to the Penguin edition, p15.

book 'deals tragically both with society and with personal relationships, and it is engineered so as to convey, ineffaceably, that the two are inextricably blended'.[2] Of all Dickens's great images, none is used more thoroughly as a metaphor than the Marshalsea is used throughout *Little Dorrit*, and none is realised with greater intensity and detail. Because it is such a dense novel, with much interweaving of plots and themes, and because it is dominated by this great image, the temptation arises to connect the two, and to look upon the prison as the organizing symbol of the book. It is important not to take this too far. For example, the idea of imprisonment is present in the representation of Mr Merdle, who behaves like a prisoner in his own home and who seems to be taking himself into custody, but what if anything do we learn from this? It teaches us little about the experience of imprisonment, and what we know about other prisoners hardly contributes to our understanding of Merdle. The significance of Merdle's behaviour is rather that he is so manifestly a man with a guilty conscience and not what he claims to be, that society's acceptance and adulation of him is all the more unjustifiable. Dickens uses symbols opportunistically, and although the prison image dominates the book, it is such a many-sided image that it is hard to think of it as a unifying or organizing principle.

The prison theme is introduced at the very beginning with the French jail. This is presented as 'a fact to be strongly smelt and tasted', more a natural than a social phenomenon, an evil that is beyond the scope of social reform.

> Besides the two men, a notched and disfigured bench, immovable from the wall, with a draught-board rudely hacked upon it with a knife, a set of draughts, made of old buttons and soup bones, a set of dominoes, two mats, and two or three wine bottles. That was all the chamber held, exclusive of rats and other unseen vermin, in addition to the seen vermin, the two men.
>
> (*LD* I 1 p40)

Such a list of apparently random objects is used often by Dickens to suggest alienation. These objects are not random, but reflect the conditions under which Rigaud and Cavalletto live, their comforts reduced to two mats, and their surplus to bones and buttons. Only the wine bottles suggest something more, and we soon

---

2 'Little Dorrit' in Gross & Pearson, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century* p176.

learn that what they suggest is the inequality that has been introduced into even this minimal social unit. We admire the ingenuity that turns the refuse into toys, but then discover that the games are used by Rigaud to establish his dominance. Even where there is virtually nothing, human beings create injustice.

In this first chapter Dickens protests against imprisonment in two passages. One is a somewhat high-flown protest against 'great kings and governors' who leave people to lie forgotten in prison. (*LD* I 1 p52) The other is more down to earth, and contains ideas taken up throughout the book: the prison taint which leaves 'imprisoned men ... all deteriorated by confinement'. (*LD* I 1 p41) The two prisoners, Rigaud and Cavalletto, are fixed characters, who are what they are and do not develop or change, so how are they *deteriorated* by prison? Rigaud could hardly become worse than he is already, and Cavalletto, as the jailer's daughter recognises, has his own invincible innocence. But the vocabulary of taint and deterioration is not empty rhetoric. It is not the characters of the two men which are threatened with corruption, but their relationship. Cavalletto is an instinctive servant and feels himself coming under the domination of Rigaud's superior intelligence and will, which is what makes him glad to see Rigaud taken away and makes him flee in terror when they meet accidentally on the road. He is afraid of becoming the good servant of a bad master.

Fitzjames Stephen complains of Dickens's abuse of the 'fallacy of minute description' to pick on the right details in a scene to make it seem more horrific to the readers than it would be for those involved in it.[3] The sort of example Stephen has in mind is a description of the workhouse which, he says, is designed to make it appear like a torture chamber, and so to feed the fears and discontents of the poor, but his criticism could also apply to Dickens's Marseilles prison. Walter Bagehot makes similar complaints about Dickens's facility for 'showing the evils of everything' and arousing popular resentment against 'the necessary painfulness of

---

3 'Mr Dickens as a Politician', *Saturday Review* 3rd January 1857, quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* p348.

due punishment and the necessary rigidity of established law'.[4] Dickens makes us feel revulsion at the conditions of the prison, and yet the more we learn about Rigaud the more convinced we are, like the innkeeper he encounters on the road, that he deserves the worst that can happen. Is there not something irresponsible in making us revolt against the punishment which, at the same time, we are encouraged to feel is due and necessary? However, the horrors of the prison are not so much intended to make us protest against imprisonment, as to intensify our revulsion against Rigaud – much as Pip's disgust is based not only on what Magwitch has done, but also on what has been done to him, on the fact that he has been on the hulks: '... there was Convict in every grain of the man ... the influences of his subsequent branded life among men ... there was Prisoner, Felon, Bondsman, plain as plain could be.' (*GE* ch40 pp352f) Not everyone can practise the philosophical austerity which would regard a person as degraded only by what he does, not at all by what he suffers. Dickens campaigns against social evils (though prison conditions are not always high on his reforming agenda) but he also knows that there is unreformable evil, of which both Rigaud and the prison are expressions.

John Carey attacks critics who admire the prison image in *Little Dorrit* as a unifying principle revealing deeper layers of meaning.

> This deep meaning is represented by maxims like 'Society is a prison' or 'All the world's a prison,' which you will find people seriously prepared to accept as the lesson the novel is intended to convey. A little thought, however, will tell us that if the novel is really designed to pass on such messages it fails in a very remarkable way. The scenes in the Marshalsea demonstrate with great imaginative conviction how being in prison corrodes the personality of the prisoner. We are shown in numerous scenes how the taint of prison has entered Dorrit's soul ... [The supposed lessons and maxims] can be using the word 'prison' ... only in some enfeebled figurative sense – a sense which no one who had ever really been in prison would condone. If society is a prison, then there's no great difference between being in prison and out of it. Dorrit would have been much the same had he never been in prison. Such suppositions run counter to everything the novel has shown us.
>
> (*The Violent Effigy* ch5 p114)

For example, Philip Hobsbaum writes of the book's 'burning indignation at the failure of Society to set its prisoners free', and John Wain says that the Dorrits'

---

4 *National Review*, October 1858, reprinted in *Literary Studies*, vol 2 p190.

European tour 'bears no more relation to freedom than does "exercise in the yard"'.[5] But Carey oversimplifies.

First, what people are doing when they emphasise the imprisonment theme is pointing out that, in a largely plotless novel, the thematic strength is what provides a principle of organization and artistic unity. Phrases such as these are, it is true, mere forms of words unless we go on to derive some reasonably coherent set of conclusions from the book as a result of its organization and unity. Carey's 'maxims' might be used, slightly flippantly, as headings under which to expound these conclusions, but it is a travesty of writers like Hobsbaum and Wain to say that they are summing up 'the lesson of the book' in simple phrases such as 'All the world's a prison'. Carey's point might be made more clearly like this: although nothing else in the book carries the same 'imaginative conviction' as the Marshalsea scenes and the characterisation of the Father of the Marshalsea, we should not try to see everything in terms of this 'organizing principle', since that will lead us to underplay the variety of different ways in which Dickens develops his criticisms of society – the melodrama of the Clennam household, the undisguised disdain for Gowan and the Hampton Court set, the unremitting irony against Casby, the non-naturalistic satire of the Circumlocution Office and of many of the Barnacle and Merdle episodes.

Secondly, Carey claims to have reduced these supposed lessons of the novel to an absurdity: 'If society is a prison, then there's no great difference between being in prison and out of it.' If we took this seriously, it would constitute an objection to metaphors as such. Of course there is much that is unique to actual imprisonment in a prison, which will not be found in figurative imprisonment in society at large – as a blow with a cosh will cause bruising while the blow delivered by bad news will not. Dickens is interested in the trauma of imprisonment. The mental

---

5 Hobsbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* p201; Wain in Gross & Pearson, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century* p182.

breakdowns of Dr Manette reflect Dickens's horror of solitary confinement, expressed in *American Notes*:

> On the haggard face of every man among these prisoners, the same expression sat. ... It had something of that strained attention which we see upon the faces of the blind and deaf, mingled with a kind of horror, as though they had all been secretly terrified.
>
> (*AN* ch7 p156)[6]

The conditions of Mr Dorrit's imprisonment are entirely different. Far from isolating him from social relationships, the prison subjects him in a particularly intense way to just those social relationships which are guaranteed to bring about his breakdown. It feeds his vanity, encourages his delusions and saves him from the consequences of his actions. As the sagacious turnkey recognises when he first arrives, he is precisely the man to be completely demoralised by the Marshalsea: 'Out? ... *he'll* never get out, unless his creditors take him by the shoulders and shove him out.' (*LD* I 6 p100) He brings a taint with him to the Marshalsea.

Carey seems to invite us to consider how William Dorrit would have fared if he had not entered the real prison, but had remained in the merely figurative prison outside. In a sense it is rather futile to think about this, since what society at large actually did to William Dorrit was put him in the Marshalsea, but of course he might have been luckier, his partnership might, despite his incompetence, have flourished – he might have had the good fortune to have a partner like Dan Doyce. In that case he would have escaped the peculiar trauma of twenty-two years in prison, and might have escaped his ultimate breakdown. But he would still have been a bad father, selfish and vain and given to self-delusion. He is not Everyman, a characterless prisoner whose experience is to stand as an exemplification of life in an imprisoning society, but a particular man who suffers a particular form of imprisonment.

A third objection to Carey's criticism is that he undervalues the way in which Dickens negotiates the move from the particular to general – the sense we have of

---

6 Dickens feels that the experience of solitary confinement has a different effect upon women, whose faces 'it humanises and refines'. (*AN* p156)

operating on both levels at once. This is a familiar point with reference to Dickensian 'characters': is Mrs Gamp an intensely realised individual or a caricature of a type? Dickens's trick is to make us answer that she is both. Similarly, is the Marshalsea an utterly convincing realisation of a particular place and time, or a generalisable emblem of an imprisoning society? Again, both, but here the issue is more complicated than in the case of Mrs Gamp.

Quoting the passage in which Amy compares the tourists and expatriates in Italy with the Marshalsea prisoners, Carey complains:

> The vague phrases with which the analogy is recommended – 'on the whole', 'pretty much as' – warn us that we have drifted into a looser part of the book. In the Marshalsea scenes we were not told 'on the whole' but precisely and distinctly what it was like to be in prison.
>
> (*The Violent Effigy* p115)

He not only picks upon the vaguer terms such as 'on the whole' while failing to draw attention to 'precisely the same', 'very like' and 'just as', but he also omits several sentences in the middle of the paragraph in which Dickens actually makes clear the points on which the comparison turns:

> They paid high for poor accommodation, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it: which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. They were envied when they went away by people left behind, feigning not to want to go: and that again was the Marshalsea habit invariably. A certain set of words and phrases, as much belonging to tourists as the College and Snuggery belonged to the jail, was always in their mouths.
>
> (*LD* II 7 p565)

What is interesting about these points of comparison is that they are not what a moralist coming from outside would immediately hit upon. Amy is thinking of people she has known, remembering phrases she overheard in her father's room or as she sat, 'wistful and wondering', on her chair beside the turnkey's fire. (*LD* I 7 p109)

Later on, at Rome, 'it seemed to Little Dorrit that a change came over the Marshalsea spirit of their society, and that Prunes and Prism got the upper hand'. (*LD* II 7 p566) What has changed between Venice and Rome? One explanation is that it is Amy, the observer, who is changing. At Venice she is still too preoccupied to think of what she sees except in terms of the past. As she says in her first letter:

> It is the same with all these new countries and wonderful sights. They are very beautiful, and they astonish me, but I am not collected enough – not familiar enough with myself, if you can quite understand what I mean – to have all the pleasure in them that I might have. What I knew before them, blends with them, too, so curiously. For instance, when we were among the mountains, I often felt (I hesitate to tell such an idle thing, dear Mr Clennam, even to you) as if the Marshalsea must be behind that great rock ... Do you remember one night when I came with Maggy to your lodging in Covent Garden? ... We were shut out that night, and sat at the iron gate, and walked about till morning. I often look up at the stars, even from the balcony of this room, and believe that I am in the street again, shut out with Maggy ... (*LD* II 4 pp522f)

By the time they reach Rome enough has happened within the Dorrit household to enable her to see things more clearly, and she is able to form her own judgements on Mrs General. The second letter, though still sad in tone, gives an impression of returning self-possession and a sense that she is beginning to live a little more in the present. The almost hallucinatory experiences that she reports in the first letter are now summed up more objectively: 'I am home-sick.' She has now plainly identified Mrs General as an enemy, and dreams of fighting back: 'I have dreamed of going down to Mrs General, with the patches on my clothes in which I can first remember myself.' (*LD* II 11 p609) She takes the prison with her, because the prison is her past, and she clings to her past, and so picks up and amplifies whatever is prison-like in the society round about her – and this, rather than abstract moralising, is the point of the extended comparison between the tourists in Venice and the Marshalsea prisoners.

Gilbert Clennam's will

Despite the close interweaving of themes and imagery in the book, the central plot is curiously loose. Arthur believes that the Dorrits' misfortunes are the fault of his mother and the Circumlocution Office. It is true enough that both are to some degree implicated, but in both cases the connection is of a minor nature. Accounts such as that of Philip Hobsbaum, tend to overstate the causal links.[7] The money that Mrs Clennam keeps from Amy would have been quickly swallowed up in the immense debt, and the Office is only one of many creditors. This seems surprising: wouldn't Dickens's cases against Mrs Clennam's cruel religion and the

7 *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* pp 193, 198 & 206.

Circumlocution Office be stronger if he had made Mr Dorrit a clear victim of one or other of them? As it is, he is primarily the victim of his own ineptitude, and his loss of money seems as socially meaningless as the inheritance which eventually comes his way.

Mrs Clennam's real secret is not to do with the Dorrits, but to do with Arthur himself, the secret of his birth. Arthur's belief that his parents were involved in the ruin of the Dorrits is almost as much a red-herring as Pip's assumption that Miss Havisham is his benefactor. Mrs Clennam's crime and secret originate in the loveless marriage forced upon Arthur's father by Gilbert Clennam. When Gilbert learns of the other woman he relents and leaves money in a codicil both to her and to the niece or daughter of her protector, Frederick Dorrit. The suppression of this codicil is Mrs Clennam's crime, but the theft of the money is less significant than the rest of the vengeance which, in the name of religion, and refining on Miss Barbary's punishment of Esther's mother, she inflicts on Arthur's mother.

I take it that she tells the truth when she insists to the sceptical Blandois and Flintwich that it was not for the sake of 'mere money ... which you, and your comrades in the prisons, may steal from anyone' that she committed her crime. (*LD* II 30 p847) She never seems very interested in money. It is her companion Flintwich whose eyes glisten 'as if they saw money'. (*LD* I 5 p92) Doing business, insofar as we ever see what she actually does, is a matter of '[looking] over some papers', and she gloomily describes the end product of all her efforts as 'the goods of this world which we have painfully got together early and late'. (*LD* I 5 pp84 & 89) The 'grasping at money ... driving hard bargains', which is how Arthur sees her business-life, is to her a drama in which the will of God is acted out. Hence the importance of the Eternal Day-Book, and of keeping the money from Arthur's mother. If Arthur's mother got the money it would mean that she, not Mrs Clennam, was the righteous one.

Dickens, in the course of the novels, has several attempts at characterizing just what is wrong with gloomy Calvinism. Figures like the red-nosed man in *Pickwick Papers* or Chadband in *Bleak House* use religion as a meal-ticket; for Mrs Varden in *Barnaby Rudge* it is an entertainment, a relaxation of the everyday routine. It is easy to see through such figures, laugh at their motives and neutralise their menace. Much more dangerous are figures like Miss Barbary and Mrs Clennam, who truly believe and honestly act out their appalling creed. What a comfort it would be if we could suppose that Mrs Clennam was only in it for the money.

Although somewhat artificial, the story of the codicil should not be dismissed as merely a platform contrived to sustain the melodrama of Blandois's blackmail. There are parallels with the pre-plot of *Oliver Twist*, which similarly features a loveless and a loving union. As we contrast Monks, villainous offspring of the legal marriage, with Oliver, angelic child of the love-match, so we contrast the two sides of Arthur's character, the gentleness and sensitivity he inherits from his artistic mother, and the sadness and lack of purpose generated by his harsh and dismal upbringing. It is a topic which Dickens plainly believes in.

It is also a topic which can, as it were, stand up on its own. If we place too much emphasis on the connection between the Clennam history and the misfortunes of the Dorrits, we are tempted to see in Mrs Clennam's crippling sickness a sort of neat punishment for her defrauding of the Dorrits – a parallel of the sort which Arthur imagines Mrs Clennam finding: 'He withers away in his prison; I wither away in mine; inexorable justice is done; what do I owe on this score!' (*LD* I 8 p129) But once we accept that her financial crime against the Dorrits is only secondary we can get away from such Eternal Day-Book morality and see the horrors of the Clennam house, the haunted Affery, the dismal sickroom, the accumulated menace summed up in *Do not forget*, as horrific in their own right. They are not punishments inflicted by an external judge, but conditions that Mrs Clennam has created for herself by sacrificing life to religion, banishing her husband and incarcerating Arthur's mother.

Theologically, Mrs Clennam must be forgivable. And Little Dorrit forgives her. We have seen Dickens using financial crime and motives of gain as a way of mitigating the horror of evil, making it calculable, and bringing it within the scope of human and social remedies. Squeers's part in the fraud on Madeline Bray brings him within the reach of the law, and so now it is the financial aspect of Mrs Clennam's crime which brings her within the scope of Amy's forgiveness. But while theology is satisfied in this way, Dickens is aware that human evil is not so readily dealt with. There are parts of the human tragedy in which forgiveness doesn't operate. Mrs Clennam kneels to Amy but cannot face Arthur, any possibility of change being ruled out by her paralysis. This end to her life makes us think of Mrs Joe. By putting these powerful oppressors beyond the reach of intelligent communication Dickens is emphasising that although Arthur might forgive vicariously through Amy, and although Pip might be softened in retrospect (*GE* ch35), some relationships are too damaged for reconciliation.

Rich and poor

In most of Dickens's novels there are those who handle money with smooth competence, for whom it seems to have no meaning beyond what it can buy in the way of the conveniences of life, or who have managed to overcome the emotional difficulties attaching to it. Whether it is in the reassuringly smooth Jarvis Lorry, or in men with rougher exteriors and a more complex relationship with their money, like John Jarndyce or Mr Wemmick, this rational attitude, this ability to take money for what it is, is something Dickens admires. Amongst the very poor, also, he identifies a certain clarity of vision with respect to money: characters as dissimilar as Good Mrs Brown and Betty Higden understand the value of money because they don't have any. Such realistic attitudes are, typically, set against a background of misty confusion, the confusion of Mr Dombey, who gives no coherent answer when asked what money is; of various sorts of bamboozlers like Bounderby, Skimpole and the Veneerings; and of the feckless and hopeless poor.

In *Little Dorrit* we have the misty confusion at all levels of the economy, but there is no one there to represent the rational and realistic attitude. The obvious candidate, Mr Meagles, with his scales and scoop, falls far short of Jarvis Lorry. Even as a man of business he is defective. He does not himself succumb to the Merdle mania, but the only significant piece of business that he conducts has the result of saddling Daniel Doyce with a partner who, as soon as his back is turned, gambles away the firm's funds. In the dénouement he prudently sees the importance of recovering the lost codicil, and this is credited to the 'old cautious habits of the scales and scoop', but it might as plausibly be attributed to his restless need for movement and activity. (*LD* II 33 p874)

Another candidate for the role of competent money-handler is Mr Rugg, but his 'professional enjoyment' of tangled affairs, although compared with a housekeeper's enjoyment of pickling, puts him sinisterly close to a parasite like Vholes. (*LD* II 28 p807) He shares the perverted admiration felt by the poor of Bleeding Heart Yard for those who go bankrupt in a big way, regarding the extent of Arthur's failure as a matter for professional congratulation, much as Mrs Plornish feels it is to her own credit to magnify the sum for which Mr Dorrit has failed. (*LD* I 12 p180)

Another way of marking the contrast between real money and dream money is the recurrent reference to sharp and precise sums, the cost of a piece of meat, the rent of a room, a bribe for a servant. In *Little Dorrit* things are vaguer. There is 'something that chinked into the doctor's greasy palm' (*LD* I 6 p103), and the 'appropriate pecuniary compliment' which Arthur makes to Mr Plornish. (*LD* I 12 p183) Where a precise sum is mentioned it quickly loses its sharp edge. Frederick is given a shilling for his dinner, and dimly divining its purpose vanishes with it into the mist and steam of the cook's shop. (*LD* I 20 p283) The chandler who believes that the marshal is cheating him has arrived at a definite sum, three-and-nine a week, as the value of the imagined swindle, and when Tip repays Arthur, he satisfies his pride with an illusorily exact amount. (*LD* I 8 p128 & I 36 p474) Their

precision only serves to emphasise how far they are from reality. When Mr Pancks works out the amount he can allow from his limited funds to defray John Chivery's expenses, he comes up against John's soft-headed refusal to take the money. (*LD* I 25 p345) Elsewhere in Dickens, however problematical and dangerous money might be when it comes wholesale, the pennies and shillings of everyday life retain their familiar solidity – a device parodied by the chandler's three-and-nine, and by Miss Rugg's breach of promise damages, 'eighteenpence an epithet'. (*LD* I 25 p344)

The denial of reality reaches its climax in Mr Dorrit: 'some little – Testimonial ...– it is generally –ha– Money.' (*LD* I 8 p123). The little world of the Marshalsea, from a mixture of good-nature and deference for his gentle birth and education, colludes in his 'genteel fiction' that his daughters don't have to work, as Arthur seeks to muffle the chink, chink, chink of his testimonial. (*LD* I 7 p114 & 8 p125) The denial is summed up in Mr Dorrit's superb patronage of his 'pensioner': 'We don't call this a shilling, Nandy, ... we call it tobacco.' (*LD* I 31 p426)

An insistent theme in Dickens is the gross disparity between rich and poor, but this idea is less conspicuous in the two novels which deal most extensively with the experience of poverty. In both *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit*, Dickens emphasises the continuities rather than the divisions between the rich and the poor. Characters pass from poverty to riches, bearing the psychological burdens of poverty into their new state, and returning eventually to poverty. Not that Carlyle-like warnings about social disparities are absent:

> Courtly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place with famous coffee-houses, where gentlemen wearing gold-laced coats and swords had quarrelled and fought duels; costly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there were flowers in winter at guineas a-piece, pine-apples at guineas a pound, and peas at guineas a pint; picturesque ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there was a mighty theatre, showing wonderful and beautiful sights to richly-dressed ladies and gentlemen, and which was for ever far beyond the reach of poor Fanny and poor uncle; desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches in it, where the miserable children in rags among whom she had just passed, like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about (look to the rats young and old, all ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundations, and will bring the roofs on our heads!); teeming ideas of Covent Garden, as a place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters; all confused together, – made

> the room dimmer than it was in Little Dorrit's eyes, as they timidly saw it from the door.
>
> (*LD* I 14 p208)

As in *Dombey & Son*, where Dickens describes the dens of the poor as 'within the echoes of our carriage wheels', and in *Bleak House* where he talks of 'civilisation and barbarism [walking] this boastful island together', here too the acquisitiveness and lavish expenditure of the rich are considered as things that exist alongside squalor, but not as causes of squalor. (*D&S* ch47 p737; *BH* ch12 p202) The rat-like poor are a problem for the political and administrative Barnacles to deal with, a matter for hygienic, not economic, reform.

The apocalyptic address to the Barnacles is a parenthesis within one phase of Amy's confused impression. She is excluded from the glamorous side of Covent Garden, without becoming identified with the huddled poor. Her alienation is only partly due to poverty. The gold lace and the guineas are less impressive as economic indicators than as sharp and bewildering visual ideas – and in spite of ourselves we cannot think of them as altogether negative ideas. When Nicholas Nickleby comes to London, he too is struck by the contrast between wealth and poverty and their juxtaposition in the city –

> The rags of the squalid ballad-singer fluttered in the rich light that showed the goldsmith's treasures, pale and pinched-up faces hovered about the windows where was tempting food. ... wealth and poverty stood side by side; repletion and starvation laid them down together.
>
> (*NN* ch32 p489)

– but if we look at these lines in their context we see that this contrast is just one of a series that make up the 'motley' character of city life. Any social or economic comment is subservient to the overall impression made by the scene, the impression of death in life. Similarly, in Amy's response to Covent Garden the main point is not the political message but her sense of confusion and incongruity.

The continuity between the extremes is emphasised by the dinginess surrounding the upper class characters and locations, such as Tite Barnacle suffering from gout in his mews house with its smell of 'concentrated provisions and extract of Sink', which reduces his distance from the poor. (*LD* I 10 p152) The

cramped and faded conditions of the Hampton Court gypsies and the cheerlessness of the crumbling Clennam house have the same effect. In the Italian scenes Dickens is torn between the magnificence of the surroundings and their seediness, and the seediness usually wins, as in: 'a faded hall which had once been sumptuous, but was now the prey of watery vapours and a settled melancholy'. (*LD* II 5 p524) Where there is an apparently unambiguous evocation of Venetian splendour –

> ... as [Mr Dorrit] sat before her on his sofa, in the bright light of a bright Italian day, the wonderful city without and the splendours of an old palace within ...

– the intention is to emphasise the continuity of Amy's feelings:

> ... she saw him at the moment in the long-familiar gloom of his Marshalsea lodging, and wished to take her seat beside him ...
>
> (*LD* II 5 p531)

Partly this is a sign of Dickens's characteristic inability to be impressed by magnificence, but it also emphasises the fact that what is wrong with people in *Little Dorrit* is not just a matter of being rich or poor.

Bleeding Heart Yard

The prison is a place apart, but it is also built into the lives of the surrounding poor. There is a strong symbiotic relationship between the Chivery tobacco shop and the prison. At a lower level there are the message carriers who live off the debtors, the 'insolvent waiters upon insolvency'. (*LD* I 9 p131) The Collegians have been able to follow the rumours of Tip's feckless and hopeless dealings in the outside world. (*LD* I 7 pp116f) Mrs Bangham the nurse sums up the interrelation between the Marshalsea and its surroundings: 'What between the buryin ground, the grocers, the waggon-stables and the paunch trade, the Marshalsea flies gets very large.' (*LD* I 6 p101)

One link between the prison and the outside world is Bleeding Heart Yard. The inhabitants of the Yard, chronically unemployed and in debt, know the inside of the Marshalsea well, and a specific link is provided by the Plornish family who, from a

mixture of good-nature, mild snobbery, and affection for Amy, have become attached to Mr Dorrit.

Like Arthur, who takes off his hat on entering Mrs Plornish's house, Dickens is interested in the feelings of the poor. Mr Plornish's birthday speech to his father-in-law, Mr Nandy, is ironically described as a 'lucid address' composed with 'enormous labour' but its convoluted incoherence is nonetheless, like Joe Gargery's, a medium for expressing genuine feeling.

> 'John Edward Nandy. Sir. While there's a ounce of wittles or drink of any sort in this present roof, you're fully welcome to your share on it. While there's a handful of fire or a mouthful of bed in this present roof, you're fully welcome to your share on it. If so be as there should be nothing in this present roof, you should be as welcome to your share on it as if it was something, much or little. And this is what I mean and so I don't deceive you, and consequently which is to stand out is to entreat of you, and therefore why not do it?' ...
>
> 'I thank you kindly, Thomas, and I know your intentions well, which is the same I thank you kindly for. But no, Thomas. Until such times as it's not to take it out of your children's mouths, which take it is, and call it by what name you will it do remain and equally deprive, though may they come, and too soon they can not come, no, Thomas, no!'
>
> (*LD* I 31 pp416f)

George Eliot picks on the Plornishes as an example of Dickens's ability to represent the outer forms of speech of the working classes, and his inability to represent their inner life, their thoughts and feelings, with comparable accuracy.[8] She seems to suggest that the delicacy and dignity of this exchange are as unrealistic as a china shepherdess, as though such fine feelings could not arise in the harsh social relations of Bleeding Heart Yard. No doubt there are some forms of self-sacrifice and generosity of which the likes of Plornish and Nandy are incapable, but Dickens has hit upon precisely the form of tragic sacrifice which does lie within the range of their experience and comprehension.

There is less authenticity in Mr Plornish's expression of his political views:

> He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell whose fault it was. It wasn't *his* place to find out, and who'd mind what he said, if he did find out? He only know'd that it wasn't put right by them what undertook that line of business, and that it didn't come right of itself.
>
> (*LD* I 12 p184)

---

8 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, July 1856.

This recalls Stephen Blackpool's repeated references to 'muddle', and there are other echoes of *Hard Times* in this chapter. Mr Plornish speaks of the poor as going 'mollancholy mad', a prominent phrase in the descriptions of Coketown, where, however, it is applied not to the workmen but their machines, the melancholy mad elephants. (*HT* I 5 p65; II 1 p146) The transfer of the epithet from the machines back to the people is significant, since in *Little Dorrit* the factory, for all its fearsomeness, is a positive force in the plot:

> ... a long low workshop, filled with benches, and vices, and tools, and straps, and wheels; which, when they were in gear with the steam-engine, went tearing round as though they had a suicidal mission to grind the business to dust and tear the factory to pieces. A communication of great trap-doors in the floor and roof with the workshop above and the workshop below made a shaft of light in this perspective, which brought to Clennam's mind the child's old picture-book, where similar rays were the witnesses to Abel's murder. The noises were sufficiently removed and shut out from the counting-house to blend into a busy hum, interspersed with periodical clinks and thumps. The patient figures at work were swarthy with the filings of iron and steel that danced on every bench and bubbled up through every chink in the planking. The workshop was arrived at by a step-ladder from the outer yard below, where it served as a shelter for the large grindstone where tools were sharpened. The whole had at once a fanciful and practical air in Clennam's eyes, which was a welcome change; and, as often as he raised them from his first work of getting the array of business documents into perfect order, he glanced at these things with a feeling of pleasure in his pursuit that was new to him.
>
> (*LD* I 23 pp312f)

This passage suggests why the Yard is not quite an effective microcosm of the economic state of England – our impression of the Doyce factory is muted, reduced to a 'busy hum interspersed with periodical clinks and thumps'. Seen from Arthur's counting-house, there is something almost facetious about the 'suicidal mission' of the machinery, and the iron-filings, instead of filling the air and lungs of the workers, merely bubble up through the floor-boards. There is in this a complacency reminiscent of the Uncommercial Traveller's visit to the lead-mill. A significant detail is the placing of the grindstone outside, a recognisable health measure in view of the appalling death-rate in the grinding trades, chronicled by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* and which forms the background to Charles Reade's Sheffield novel *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870). No doubt Dickens feels that Doyce, like the intelligent gentlemen who manage the lead-mill, has done his best.

The weakest point in the characterisation of Doyce is that we get no clear idea of his relations with his employees. It is all very well for his interest in his invention to be devoid of economic considerations, but his relationship with his workforce is inescapably economic. The only employee of Doyce & Clennam who is seen as an individual is John Baptist, and he is not typical: he is a dependant, motivated by gratitude, and he is, as we learn at the beginning of the book, instinctively feudal. It is an evasion on Dickens's part to sum up all other labour relations in the factory by nothing more than three hearty English cheers. (*LD* II 22 p738)[9]

Mr Plornish's quizzical resignation when out of work, like the factory-hands' patient and cheerful industriousness when in work, have the feel of attitudes which the novelist has ascribed to his characters on the basis of theory. The issue is not entirely a question of whether or not these attitudes existed among the working-classes. Dickens's journalism suggests that the Plornish view of poverty as a national *problem* rather than as a matter for class *conflict* was one which popular education was promoting. But even if a survey could establish that the Plornish view is held by twenty or eighty percent of the working-class, it would not alter the fact that Plornish speaking to Arthur about poverty does not convince us as utterly as Plornish addressing his father-in-law.

The factory appears as a positive force partly because of the contrast with the other economic power in the Yard, Casby the patriarchal landlord, and his proxy Pancks. Pancks collecting rents in the Yard sends 'a swell of terror on before him, and [leaves] it in his wake' (*LD* I 23 p325), but we don't see him in action there until after we have already seen and heard enough of him to suspect that there is a certain ambivalence in his character. Even on first meeting Arthur begins to suspect that Pancks is not entirely what he seems. Pancks has been saying that business occupies his entire life, and Arthur sighs at the thought, hearing echoes of

---

9 Although the factory is in the Yard, it doesn't employ the Bleeding Hearts themselves, as we learn from the account of the feast inaugurating the new partnership, where the participation of the Yard is listed in addition to the feasting of the factory workers and their families. (*LD* I 23 p312)

his parents. For Arthur, business means the suppression of personality, of all individual tastes and inclinations, and he does not see that for a man like Pancks business could be the way in which he expresses his personality.

> 'I have an inclination to get money, sir,' said Pancks, 'if you will show me how.' He blew off that sound again, and it occurred to [Arthur] for the first time that it was his way of laughing. He was a singular man in all respects; he might not have been quite in earnest, but that the short, hard, rapid manner in which he shot out these cinders of principles, as if they were done by mechanical revolvency, seemed irreconcilable with banter. (*LD* I 13 p202)

Immediately before we see Pancks in action in the Yard ('Pay up, or produce your property!' (*LD* I 23 p324)), he gives a hint that there is more to business than being Casby's grubber. Referring to his interest in the Dorrits, he says:

> It may be all extraordinary together ... It may be out of the ordinary course, and yet be business. In short it is business. I am a man of business. What business have I in this present world, except to stick to business? No business. ... Now ... to put this business on its own footing, it's not my proprietor's ...
>
> (*LD* I 23 p322)

Pancks differs from that other good man in a bad job, Mr Wemmick. In both there is the same hyperactivity, the same sense of being at home in the world of law and money, but whereas Pancks moves on and finds a haven in the good business of Doyce and Clennam, Wemmick remains with Jaggers and Newgate and the two sides of his life remain unreconciled. Wemmick, whether in Little Britain or in Walworth, would probably not have entrusted portable property to a man like Merdle, who steals his own spoons. Pancks makes a mistake in his calculations, loses his money, and is the better for it.

A consequence of the order of the Pancks scenes is that we never see him entirely as the Bleeding Hearts see him. Their fear and loathing of him, because we at first suspect, and later know for certain, that it is misdirected, is never given its full value. Dickens doesn't present things unequivocally from the point of view of the poor. We don't hear the 'wolfish' tone that he threatens us with in *Hard Times*, and which is apparent in the brickmaker's speech to Mrs Pardiggle in *Bleak House*, or in the mob around the grindstone in *A Tale of Two Cities*. (*HT* II 6 p192 ; *BH* ch8 p158; *TTC* III 2 p291)

The Bleeding Hearts are desperately poor, hungry, out of work and insecure, but they are not like the poor of Tom-all-alone's. We hear nothing of the smell and squalor of the Yard, and in this book it is the wealthy merchant's house that falls down, not the slum. There is too, despite the insecurity and the threat of the Marshalsea and the workhouse, a sort of stability about the community, suggested by the discussion of the traditions associated with the name. (*LD* ch12 pp176f) There is even a suggestion that the Bleeding Hearts have the vote, although the passage is not clear – it could just be that they take part in the mob scenes that accompany elections. (*LD* I 25 p350)[10] The Plornishes are closer to the Kenwigses of *Nicholas Nickleby* than to the brickmakers of *Bleak House*. They have not crossed over into brutishness. Mr Plornish comes home 'lime-whitened', but we don't see him 'all stained with clay and mud, and looking very dissipated, lying at full-length on the ground'. (*LD* I 12 p179; *BH* ch8 p156) Nor would we say of him, as is said of Jo: 'It must be a strange state to be like Jo!' (*BH* ch16 p274) With much about them that is ridiculous (the genteel fingernail on the signpost, the stories about the name of the Yard, the delight in associating with spectacular debtors) the Plornishes are, one feels, potential readers of *Household Words* – and Dickens understands them better than George Eliot gives him credit for.

Debt

'They'd all be references for one another, if you'd let 'em,' says Mr Pancks, speaking on behalf of his employer. ' ... And four wooden legs are more troublesome to you than two, when you don't want any.' (*LD* I 23 p319) Earlier he puts things more plainly still:

> If a man takes a room of you at half-a-crown a week, and when the week comes round hasn't got the half-crown, you say to that man, Why have you got the room then? If you haven't got the one thing, why have you got the other? What have you been and done with your money?
>
> (*LD* I 13 p198)

[10] In certain metropolitan constituencies the suffrage was wider before 1832 than after, so perhaps the male Bleeding Hearts did have the vote. Otherwise in the passage in question Dickens is straining the truth in order to get an extra dig at the parliamentary system.

We have just been sympathising with Mr Plornish, when he gives the tenant's side of the conversation reported by Pancks: '... if they see a man and his wife and children going to Hampton Court in a Wan ... they says, "Hallo! I thought you was poor, my improvident friend!"' (*LD* I 12 p184) But it is hard not to sympathise also with Pancks's exasperation and to feel that his questions need an answer, particularly if the victim of the debtors' irresponsibility is not Casby but Mrs Plornish herself, whose customers 'exclusively confined themselves to owing'. (*LD* II 13 p632) Dickens recognises that the Bleeding Hearts are improvident and irresponsible and that it would be better if they weren't.

The attitude to the Bleeding Hearts is like that of the Collegians who have 'come to regard insolvency as the normal state of mankind, and the payment of debts as a disease that occasionally broke out'. (*LD* I 8 p128) The themes of imprisonment and debt are related – the prisoners' irresponsibility is encouraged by their confinement: '... there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth,' says the doctor in the prison, '... we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace.' (*LD* I 6 p103) We are warned that the prisoners have a habit of feigning an attachment to the prison (*LD* II 7 p565), so perhaps should not take the doctor's eulogy too seriously. But sincere or not, he is repudiating responsibility, and doing so by repudiating the great emblem of respectable domesticity, the door-knocker. When we find the same irresponsibility in Bleeding Heart Yard as in the prison, it is a sign that the two are part of the same system, both in the sense that there is a regular traffic between the two places, and in the sense that the Bleeding Hearts are de-moralised by their poverty even when not actually confined within the walls of the prison.

Even Little Dorrit has acquired something of the Marshalsea attitude to debt. She shocks Arthur by suggesting that it is unfair that her father, having paid with so much of his life, should also have to pay with his money.

> The prison, which could spoil so many things, had tainted Little Dorrit's mind no more than this. Engendered as the confusion was, in compassion for the poor

> prisoner, her father, it was the first speck Clennam had ever seen, it was the last speck Clennam ever saw, of the prison atmosphere upon her.
>
> He thought this, and forebore to say another word. With the thought, her purity and goodness came before him in their brightest light. The little spot made them the more beautiful.
>
> (*LD* I 35 p472)

Leavis argues that Clennam is wrong to regard this as a speck, since Amy is unreservedly right to protest against her father's imprisonment in this way.[11] I doubt if the passage can bear this interpretation. Although the account is given through Clennam's eyes, the use of the word *speck* is not questioned by the narrator's voice. This makes the passage difficult. Amy is not interested in the money, and there are other ways in which she could have expressed her compassion – so why does she say what she says here? The question is equally difficult whether we take it as a question about Amy's psychology or about Dickens's intentions in the passage.

Part of the answer is that we have here another example of its being better to be wrong. It is unequivocally wrong to advocate non-payment of debt, but it is a mark of Amy's goodness that she is so committed to her feeling for her father that she cannot see that it's wrong. But there remains the question of why she expresses her compassion in just this way, and I can only think that it is because, yes, she is infected with the irresponsibility of the Collegians. '"Yes, I know I am wrong," she pleaded timidly, "don't think any worse of me; it has grown up with me here."' (*LD* I 35 p472) To understand the full depth of her timid pleading we must recall that she is in love with Clennam and, as we see in her later letters to him, desperate for his good opinion.

We are tempted to think of Amy as Fanny thinks of her, as a 'quiet little thing' who can 'make your way anywhere', and as a sort of disapproving grandmother figure (*LD* I 20 pp277f) – in other words as someone who doesn't feel the difficulties and temptations that others feel. Thus we might look at her early endeavours and conclude that she was a determined little person who only had to make up her

11 *Dickens the Novelist* ch5 p295.

mind to learn to sew and she could do it. What we learn from the 'speck' is that the really hard part was making up her mind. Having grown up with the Marshalsea attitude to debt all around her, she knows no other. The strength of her goodness is shown by her overcoming the demoralising effects of such an attitude, even though she has taken it for granted. The difficulty of her mental struggle is suggested by the way, at this moment of extreme emotion, the belief which is part of her inheritance, but which she has schooled herself to suppress, forces its way to the surface.

Humbug

Despite remarks about Casby's squeezing, screwing and jobbing, both as town agent for the Barnacles and on his own account, we are invited to hate him less because he is a grasping landlord, than because he is a humbug. With his 'smooth face ... like ripe wall-fruit,' and 'long grey hair ... like floss silk or spun glass' he is 'elephantine' and generally 'so grey, so slow, so quiet, so impassionate, so very bumpy in the head'. (*LD* I 13 pp187ff) And he has learnt that such an appearance is good for business. When he worked for the Barnacles they exploited 'his looking so supremely benignant that nobody could suppose the property screwed or jobbed under such a man', and now he gets away with more on his own account than 'anybody with a less nobby and less shining crown could possibly have done'. (*LD* I 13 p190)

There are several touches in Casby which echo Pecksniff – for example, he disposes of 'an immense quantity of solid food with the benignity of a good soul who was feeding someone else', as Pecksniff warms his own back 'as if it were a widow's back, or an orphan's back, or an enemy's back, or a back that any less excellent man would have suffered to be cold'. (*LD* I 13 p199; *MC* ch3 p86) There is a gusto in the description of Pecksniff which is lacking in the dry comment upon Casby. Casby is not a 'character' on the scale of Pecksniff. On the other hand, he is placed in an economic and social context. Whereas Pecksniff is an architect by

accident, and could as easily have been something else, Casby cannot be detached from the way he gets his money. Pecksniff's trail of pretences is explained by his desire to get Old Martin's money, but the explanation is unconvincing – not because we don't believe in his greed, but because the hypocrisy is out of proportion. He is false first and greedy afterwards, as though the money motive is an excuse. In Casby the connection between greed and hypocrisy is made more pointed by association with the Barnacles, and through them with the falseness which pervades political and social life.

In his slow, dim way, Casby is aware that he is exploiting his appearance and imposing on the world. We don't know how far he is imposing on himself. When he polishes his bald head each day, how conscious is he that he is perpetrating a fraud? When his hair is shorn, is he merely exposed to the world, or also to himself? We are not told enough to know on which side of the line between hypocrisy and self-deception Casby falls. The narrowness of the line that separates the two is evident from the masterly portrait of Mr Dorrit.

With his childlike inability to manage money, Mr Dorrit brought his particular taint with him to prison. What underlies this is his inability to see the truth about himself. Had he remained rich he would have continued to live in a society which would conspire to disguise unpleasant truths, and he might have continued all his life an easy-going, vain, affectionate man. It is his misfortune to be in the Marshalsea where the normal varnish of society is stripped away, and where it takes enormous, destructive effort to disguise the truth – effort on his part, and on that of his fellow-prisoners. He is a beggar, a fact which he hides under talk of testimonials and loans. He lives on his daughters, a fact which he simply rejects. By playing the game with Nandy of not calling a shilling by its proper name, he shows that he knows that others are playing the same game with him.

The word which enables him to perpetuate his illusions is *gentleman*. The turnkeys and prisoners respect him as a gentleman and help him to maintain his

position. He demands, and they accept, that they should act as servants, although, in another sense, the servile behaviour of Plornish and Chivery has much that is more truly gentlemanly. There is something odious about Mr Dorrit's assumption of the rights of a gentleman, and something more odious still about the way Rigaud asserts his gentlemanly status over Cavalletto, but when Arthur Clennam, on becoming an inmate of the Marshalsea, is unquestioningly treated with the respect due to his rank, it seems less appalling. This is partly because we feel that Arthur has done something to earn the affection of Mrs Plornish and John Chivery – he has, at least, always treated them decently – but it is also because there is a limit to Dickens's subversiveness towards the class system.

In moments of near-honesty Mr Dorrit almost admits that his assumption of gentlemanliness is a mere performance – 'Necessity and time' have taught him how to enforce respect (*LD* I 19 p267)[12] – but for the most part he seems to have convinced himself that he is still living as a gentleman should live. His moments of anger when the illusion fails reveal the intensity of the inner struggle to maintain it.

His anger always comes as a surprise. There are several varieties of anger in the book: Mr Meagles's irascibility, Blandois's vengeful anger against society, Pancks's righteous indignation, Mrs Clennam's wrath, Miss Wade's resentment, Gowan's irritability, Fanny's peevishness, the random malevolence of Mr F's Aunt, and Tattycoram's bad temper. In these cases, except perhaps that of Mr F's Aunt, the outbursts are predictable, almost rational, deducible from known facts of character and circumstance. They lack the element of shock which anger so often has in real life, and which gives such authenticity to Mr Dorrit's. The occasion is always so slight, an everyday occurrence which unleashes his fury because of some threatening allusion apparent only to him, such as the gift of halfpennies, or Tip's casual swaggering about Arthur's refusal of a loan. (*LD* I 6 p107; I 31 p428)

---

12 Like the old Duke of Omnium, who is said to have 'looked like a duke, and known how to set a high price on his own presence'. (*Phineas Redux* ch24 p215)

When he is out of prison and there is no need to struggle, the habit of pretence is too great for him to forget – hence his obsessive fear that he has been found out, and his readiness to see insults where none are intended, and hence too his immediate collusion with Mrs General's pretence that she is not paid a salary for her services. (*LD* II 2 p502) Altogether, Mrs General answers Mr Dorrit's imperative need to cover things up, to varnish over things and hide unpleasant truths.

Fanny is no less determined than her father to establish the family's respectability, and she is prepared to learn from Mrs General's experience of imposing on society, but she repudiates Mrs General herself. She knows from early experience of Mrs Merdle how far social acceptability is a matter of bluff, and like Blandois she is determined to assert her status by act of will. Like Blandois too she sees her assertion of status primarily as a matter of revenge on a society that has slighted her. She looks forward to giving Mrs Merdle's maid 'before her eyes, things from my dressmaker's ten times as handsome and expensive as she once gave me from hers'. (*LD* II 6 p551) This perversion of giving into aggression recalls how Mr Dorrit interprets gifts inappropriately given as insults. Having always insisted that gifts of money should be euphemistically described as testimonials or loans, when he bestows parting gifts on the Collegians with the words, 'It is a donation, not a loan', he is evidently exacting a sort of revenge. (*LD* I 36 p475)

Fanny is confident that Mrs Merdle will collude with her if she boldly denies the past. The willingness of society to accept even the most preposterous impostors at their own estimation is a theme that is present in Dickens from Jingle to Veneering. Sometimes there are particular explanations – the spinster aunt who wants to believe she can inspire love; the second husband callously reluctant to disturb the pretence that Squeers is a suitable guardian for his wife's sons; the prison governor who has professionally invested in the penitence of Heep and Littimer. Elsewhere we are presented with the fact that people simply do accept imposture – they believe Bounderby's account of himself and Pumblechook's

version of Pip's early history. Whereas in the first cases we adduce well known motives to explain the credulity, in cases like Bounderby and Pumblechook the credulity itself is the evidence of hidden motives, indicating the character of the credulous society. We learn something about society in *Martin Chuzzlewit* from the fact that it accepts Sarah Gamp as a fit attendant for the sick.

What we have in *Little Dorrit* is an account of society's collusion with imposture not merely in terms of the interested motives of individuals, but also as a network of pretence built into the social system. The point of the 'great patriotic conference' between Merdle and Decimus Barnacle is that the Barnacles need Merdle's money, in the shape of his control over three rotten boroughs, and Merdle needs a mark of the Barnacles' approval to bolster the prestige of his bank. (*LD* II 12) The Barnacles bring respectability, Merdle brings money, and the existence of one depends upon the other. The meeting is engineered with gay irresponsibility by the engaging young Barnacle, assisted by Bar; the compact is sealed by the addition of Edmund Sparkler to the pay-roll of the Circumlocution Office; and the whole affair is applauded by Bar and Bishop:

> ... it was indeed highly important to Society that one in the trying situation of unexpectedly finding himself invested with a power for good or evil in Society, should become, as it were, merged in the superior power of a more legitimate and more gigantic growth, the influence of which (as in the case of our friend at whose board we sat) was habitually exercised in harmony with the best interests of Society. Thus instead of two rival and contending flames, a larger and a lesser, each burning with a lurid and uncertain glare, we had a blended and a softened light whose genial ray diffused an equable warmth throughout the land.
>
> (*LD* II 12 p623)

This is barely coherent nonsense, comparable with Mr Plornish's attempts at formal speech, where the syntax is weaker, perhaps, but the meaning clearer. What it underlines is the interdependence of the Barnacle humbug and the Merdle fraud.

The role of the engaging young Barnacle is interesting. It would be too much to say that Dickens approves of young Ferdinand, but he doesn't attack him as fiercely as one might expect. The man who can say, 'We must have humbug, we all like humbug, we couldn't get on without humbug', (*LD* II 28 p805) might seem to deserve the bitter comment that Dickens makes on James Harthouse: 'This vicious

assumption of honesty in dishonesty – a vice so dangerous, so deadly and so common ...' (*HT* II 2 p162) How does Ferdinand escape terms like 'vicious' and 'degenerate' which Dickens applies to Harthouse and Henry Gowan? (*LD* II 6 p540) One Henry Gowan is enough for the book, but still, why is Ferdinand treated with such gentle irony? One thing that distinguishes him from Gowan is that he does his job, such as it is, conscientiously. Faced with the difficulty of bringing about the great meeting, he looks at his watch, impatient to get away, but stays until he has achieved what he has undertaken to do – like Neckett the follower. (*LD* II 12 p624; *BH* ch15 p260)

The share-buying epidemic is described as a moral infection and a flame 'which the mighty Barnacles had fanned', (*LD* II 13 p627) but the presence of the representative figures, Bar and Bishop, shows that it is not a single family that is responsible, nor indeed just the government represented by the Barnacles. The whole ruling élite is involved. Bishop talks of an equable warmth being diffused throughout the land, but what in fact is diffused downwards is the élite's dangerous belief in Merdle and his millions. The Bleeding Hearts believe in Merdle: 'You'd be easier with us if you were Mr Merdle,' they say to Pancks. (*LD* II 13 p629) Having nothing themselves, they are comforted by speculating about his fortune, and want to entrust the government to him. The fire fanned by the Barnacles depends on the inclination of the Bleeding Hearts to believe, and on their liking for talk of large sums of money. This is, in fact, one aspect of a more general willingness to be swayed by arguments and opinions far removed from their real interests and experience.

> ... they had a notion that it was a sort of Divine visitation upon a foreigner that he was not an Englishman ... In this belief, to be sure, they had long been carefully trained by the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, who were always proclaiming to them, officially, that no country which failed to submit itself to those two large families could possibly hope to be under the protection of Providence; and who, when they believed it, disparaged them in private as the most prejudiced people under the sun. ... They believed that foreigners had no independent spirit, as never being escorted to the poll in droves by Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle, with colours flying and the tune of Rule Britannia playing.
>
> (*LD* I 25 pp350f)

This passage, which criticises both the politicians who lead and the crowd that cheers them on, should be contrasted with the curious comments that Dickens makes when the factory workers see Doyce off on his travels with rousing cheers: he traces the Englishman's great capacity for cheering back to 'Saxon Alfred'. (*LD* II 22 p738) When the crowd cheers someone who directly affects their lives, it is a positive, rousing thing. When they cheer a stranger who bamboozles them with nonsense, it is a bad thing – we recall, perhaps, the sinister reference at the beginning of the book to 'great kings or governors ... careering in the sunlight jauntily, and men cheering them on' while their victims lie forgotten in prison. (*LD* I 1 p52)

The patriotic humbug with which the Barnacles cynically manipulate the Bleeding Hearts infects Mr Meagles too. We repeatedly see Mr Meagles in the wrong. Sometimes it is his good qualities that lead him astray. His affection for his daughter makes him protest at the absurdity of keeping her in quarantine, and makes him incapable of imagining that Miss Wade could possibly hate her. (*LD* I 2 p55; II 33 p877) Affection for Pet also plays a part in his failure over Tattycoram, assisted by an over-confident belief in his own practicality. His characteristic insistence on regarding social issues from a purely personal point of view is precisely what George Eliot identifies as the defining mark of the philistine.[13] Meagles is a man of genuine kindness, but he has limitations. [14]

> Clennam could not help speculating ... whether there might be in the breast of this honest, affectionate, and cordial Mr Meagles, any microscopic portion of the mustard-seed that had sprung up into the great tree of the Circumlocution Office. His curious sense of a general superiority to Daniel Doyce, which seemed to be founded, not so much on anything in Doyce's personal character as on the mere fact of his being an originator and a man out of the beaten track of other men, suggested

---

13 'The Natural History of German Life' *Westminster Review* July 1856 p77.

14 When Meagles speaks of the allowances that must be made for Tattycoram, he uses thoroughly Dickensian arguments: Tattycoram has been starved of the graces of the imagination, and so (as the narrator says in *Hard Times*) is liable to take a 'wolfish turn'. (*LD* I 2 p56; *HT* II 6 p192) But although he differs from Mr Gradgrind on the value of fancy and wonder, there are points of similarity between the two men. When Meagles says 'an immense deduction must be made from all the influences and experiences that have formed us' in order to understand Tattycoram he echoes the tone, if not the content, of Gradgrind's remarks on the circumstances of Sissy's early years. (*LD* I 2 p56; *HT* I 14 p128) The mechanical way in which Meagles derives Tattycoram's name also has the ring of Gradgrind. (*LD* I 2 p57)

the idea.

(*LD* I 16 p238)

When he is helping to set up the partnership of Doyce & Clennam, it is Doyce the blacksmith's son who has to be investigated and justified to Clennam, while there is little question but that Clennam, the born gentleman, is a suitable partner, and yet it is Clennam who nearly ruins the firm. More sadly, Meagles has a painful reason for mistrusting the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, and yet he remains obstinately attached to them. He swaps genealogies with Henry Gowan, and after the painful wedding celebrations he cannot help being gratified by the 'high company' they have been mixing with. (*LD* I 17 p248 & I 34 p459) He is trying to find some consolation somewhere for his great loss, in much the same way as the Bleeding Hearts find solace for their poverty in contemplating Merdle and his Millions.

Mr Meagles says what he thinks and has opinions and certainly does not conform to Mrs General's idea of what is proper, and yet there is something about his collection of souvenirs that is suggestive of the tourists in Italy. Speaking of his pictures he claims to have picked them up to please himself, while being careful to remark that 'people *had* considered them rather fine.' And interestingly, the pictures have 'such coats of varnish that every holy personage served as a fly-trap'. (*LD* I 16 p237) Varnish of course is the particular attribute of Mrs General:

> Mrs General was not to be told of anything shocking. Accidents, miseries, and offences, were never to be mentioned before her. Passion was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs General, and blood was to change to milk and water. The little that was left in the world, when all these deductions were made, it was Mrs General's province to varnish. In that formation process of hers, she dipped the smallest of brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration. The more cracked it was the more Mrs General varnished it.
>
> There was varnish in Mrs General's voice, varnish in Mrs General's touch, an atmosphere of varnish round Mrs General's figure. Mrs General's dreams ought to have been varnished – if she had any – lying asleep in the arms of the good Saint Bernard, with the feathery snow falling on his house-top.
>
> (*LD* II 2 p503)

There is something of this in the behaviour of Mr and Mrs Meagles – Mr Meagles's facile solution to Tattycoram's rage, and his desire to give her a name with pleasant associations, and the impression Mrs Meagles gives of having been 'looking at homely things for five-and-fifty years or more'. (*LD* I 2 p54) What we feel in their

case, but not in Mrs General's, is that the impulse to varnish comes from felt experience, as in their reaction to the death of Pet's sister:

> Pet and her baby sister were so exactly alike, and so completely one, that in our thoughts we have never been able to separate them since. It would be no use to tell us that our dead child was a mere infant. We have changed that child according to the changes in the child spared to us ...
>
> (*LD* I 2 p58)

Whereas Mrs General's varnishing is negative, a matter of doing away with unpleasant facts, the Meagles varnish by looking out for good things. They take Pet abroad to 'keep her amused', and 'as practical people, it is the business of our lives to show her everything that we think can please her'. (*LD* I 2 pp58 & 56) This includes taking her to the Foundling Hospital, a place whose existence Mrs General would probably deny.[15]

The Circumlocution Office

Often in Dickens a problem is presented as a social problem, but the remedy offered is merely personal. In *Little Dorrit* we start with three victims of the Circumlocution Office, Arthur, Mr Meagles (on behalf of Daniel Doyce) and the Dorrit family. The novel ends with the problems of this group of characters all fairly resolved – Arthur and Amy married and the suppressed codicil restored as part of Tattycoram's reconciliation with Mr Meagles – and yet the Circumlocution Office remains untouched. F R Leavis would say that this is as it should be – would protest against the phrase *merely personal*. It is not the creative artist's business to prescribe social remedies: 'only in the individual is life "there".'[16]

> Whether or not the Circumlocution Office conveys an altogether fair criticism of Government and bureaucracy at the time of the Crimean War doesn't matter. Life always has to be defended, vindicated and asserted against Government, bureaucracy and organization – against society in that sense.
>
> (*Dickens the Novelist* ch5 p342)

Leavis describes the 'potent evocation of time, eternity and the non-human universe' in the description of the Great St Bernard at the beginning of the second

---

15 This openness and generosity explain why Dickens is far less severe on Meagles's national prejudices (the 'national objection' to cocked hats, for example (*LD* I 2 p60)) than he will be on those of his other great English philistine, Podsnap.

16 *Dickens the Novelist*: ch5 p302.

book as 'solemn anti-hubristic realism,' and so it is, but he puts too much weight on it when he uses it to suggest that 'the "society" of organization, social science, "welfare", equality and statistics is as empty a nothing as the "Society" of manner and exclusiveness'.[17]

Even in the St Bernard passages the imagery is ambiguous:

> ... the ascending Night came up the mountain like a rising water. When it at last rose to the walls of the convent of the Great St Bernard, it was as if that weather-beaten structure were another Ark, and floated on the shadowy waves.
>
> (*LD* II 1 p483)

– does the image of the Ark here convey a sense of the insecurity or of the resilience of human efforts in the face of nature? In the picture of Mrs General asleep in the arms of St Bernard there is obvious satire upon the smallness of Mrs General's ideas of human society (Leavis's 'Society of exclusiveness'), but just because *she* has absurdly petty and narrow ideas on social organization, it doesn't follow that everyone's aspirations for society are equally absurd. Elsewhere in the book it is hard to disentangle the 'non-human' from the social environment. In this description of the morning view from Amy's garret both work together to give an effect highly suggestive of good and evil, but which yields no clear moral:

> ... the smokeless housetops and the distant country hills were discernible over the wall in the clear morning. As she gently opened the window, and looked eastward down the prison yard, the spikes upon the wall were tipped with red, then made a sullen purple pattern on the sun as it came flaming up into the heavens.
>
> (*LD* I 19 p276)

And fantasy too is involved – the country hills seen from Amy's window reappear towards the end when Mr Dorrit in Rome tells of the air which is 'all things considered, very good. It blows over the – ha – Surrey hills.' (*LD* II 19 p708) One is tempted, in the face of an argument such as Leavis's, to say that there is *no* non-human universe in Dickens.

We must see the attack on the Circumlocution Office as a social and political message. How effective is it? Mr Meagles is not a satisfactory witness against the Office, since he is infected with a mustardseed of the snobbery on which it rests.

---

17 *Dickens the Novelist* ch5 pp 358 & 354f.

Nor does the case of the Dorrits provide strong evidence, since we can be sure that Mr Dorrit met the Circumlocution Office at least half-way in the matter of irresponsibility. As for Arthur, the bafflement he experiences in its fire-proof corridors and in his encounters with its unhelpful personnel is so closely akin to his bafflement by the world in general that the Office seems more a projection of his state of mind than an objective menace to society. The Merdle scandal, and the Barnacles' involvement in it, is certainly a social phenomenon, but even here our attention wanders towards issues of personal morality and psychology – the collusion of the élite with the manifestly untrustworthy Merdle, and the gullibility of a population fascinated by the idea of millions of money. The social topic tends to become personal, and resolve itself into intriguing questions about human nature. We might be inclined to leave it there.

But Dickens does not leave it there. When he denounces the science of *How not to do it* he is as peremptory as the French landlady declaring that 'there are people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beasts and cleared out of the way'. (*LD* I 11 p169) When he says that under the Barnacles Britannia as a whole is in danger of being reduced to the level of Bleeding Heart Yard, when he refers glancingly to the disasters of the Crimea, when he denounces the Circumlocution Barnacles as the 'largest jobbers in the universe', 'on every speck of ocean and dry land on which there was nothing (except mischief) to be done and anything to be pocketed', or satirises Lord Decimus and his behoving machine – in all these cases he is speaking in the tone of the impatient social critic. (*LD* I 10 p165; I 26 p361; I 33 p441; I 34 p450; I 34 p455)

It is a strain of criticism that has persisted in the bashing of bureaucrats and red-tape traditional to British comedy. The Circumlocution Office became a catchphrase amongst journalists of the Dickens school – see for example 'The Steam's Highway'[18] where it is used not to denigrate all public servants but to make a distinction not often observed by bureaucrat-bashers, between a public

18 *AYR*, 18 March 1865 p179.

institution that is knowledgeable and responsive and one that is not. And under the names of 'the Roundabout Swindle' and 'Vicaria, this English malaria' the Office appears in Reade's *Put Yourself in His Place* (ch28).

At one point Dickens spies a remedy. As he is going over Doyce's books, Arthur notices that:

> The calculations and entries, in his own hand, of which there were many, were bluntly written, and with no very neat precision; but were always plain and directed straight to the purpose. It occurred to Arthur that a far more elaborate and taking show of business – such as the records of the Circumlocution Office made perhaps – might be far less serviceable, as being meant to be far less intelligible.
>
> (*LD* I 23 p311)

The diffidence of 'It occurred to Arthur ...' is ironical: the narrator is confidently ignoring the differences between managing the affairs of the nation and managing those of a small engineering works. We can see Dickens's point, of course, clarity in accounting is useful, and certainly the point about Doyce's accounts is underwritten by all the other remarks about his almost monklike self-abnegation. But as in the denunciations, so here in the remedy, we can hear the tone which Fitzjames Stephen recognises:

> The greatest of our statesmen, lawyers, and philosophers would shrink from delivering any trenchant and unqualified opinion upon so complicated and obscure a subject as the merits of the whole administrative Government of the empire. To Mr Dickens the question presents no such difficulty.
>
> (FitzJames Stephen 'The licence of modern novelists' *Edinburgh Review*, July 1857)

Stephen's article is a perfect example of the Circumlocution technique, with its disdainful refusal to deliver any 'trenchant and unqualified opinion', and as such demonstrates Dickens's point. And yet it is impossible, with twentieth century experience, to avoid sensing the dangers inherent in Dickens's impatient oversimplification of the nature of constitutional government.

Conclusion

When Orwell, in the passage quoted in the Introduction, describes the face he sees behind Dickens's work, it could, apart from the matter of age, be Mr Meagles. Such an idea would be resisted by Leavis, who rightly points out that Dickens puts distance between himself and Meagles by his ability to place him and recognise his

snobbery and philistinism.[19] But Leavis is wrong to deny the Meagles side of Dickens. By doing so he makes this book seem tamer and tidier than it is. The great beauty of the final sentence should not make us forget that, mixed in with the 'usual uproar', there can be heard Mr Meagles 'arresting' Daniel Doyce, Pancks cutting Casby's hair and Dickens growing, in Orwell's words, generously angry.

19 *Dickens the Novelist* ch5 p336.

Chapter 8: Manhood and Independence

> Home had never been a very pleasant place to me, because of my sister's temper. But, Joe had sanctified it, and I had believed in it. ... I had believed in the forge as the glowing road to manhood and independence. Within a single year, all this was changed. Now, it was all coarse and common, and I would not have had Miss Havisham and Estella see it on any account.
>
> (*GE* ch14 p134)

Miss Havisham and Estella provide the standard by which Pip passes judgement, but what he describes could be the common disenchantment of an intelligent adolescent suddenly looking about, making comparisons and seeing through the illusions of childhood. Stripped of its sensational elements, *Great Expectations* would remain a poignant story of a young man bent on self-improvement and finding in his new life that the companions of his childhood are, as Estella puts it, no longer 'fit company'. (*GE* ch29 p258) The progressive alienation from Joe and the consequent bouts of remorse, the desire to buy him off followed by gestures like the penitential barrel of oysters and shaking his blackened hand, all illustrate the tensions felt by one obeying the Smilesian imperative to get on in life.

But as it is, the sensational elements, the extraordinary events which precipitate Pip's rise, prevent us from seeing him as a straightforward representative of the socially mobile. He is no self-helper, unlike Biddy. Her shoes, by her own effort, 'came up at the heel'. (*GE* ch17 p152) She stays at home and helps others rise with her, altogether much more closely in accord with the ideals of Smiles. It is not likely that she feels much emotional tension at outgrowing Mr Wopsle's aunt. Her progress suggests what Pip's might have been if he had taken the road to manhood and independence through the forge. Like Pip, Biddy gets her opportunity as a consequence of the convict's escape – the leg-iron that Orlick uses on Mrs Joe is what opens the Gargery house to her – but her opportunity is an opportunity to work, not to get money for nothing; and it does not lead her away from her own people.

Pip and Estella

Although the first hint of Pip's dissatisfaction comes when he realises that Joe cannot read, which happens before the call to Satis House, the great inspiration for his longing to become a gentleman is his passion for Estella. Most boys and young men spend much of their time thinking about sex, as Dickens coyly acknowledges in his portraits of boyish infatuation: Augustus Moddle, the youngest of Mrs Todgers's commercial gentlemen, and David Copperfield in Canterbury, falling for one unsuitable woman after another; clownish youths, like Toots and John Chivery, who entertain a constant but hopeless passion for the heroine. Dickens pays little attention to the nature of sexual desire, concentrating rather on the romantic poses and high-flown language of the swains, and on the awkward dignity achieved by the faithful lovers on recognising that their suit is hopeless. With that sordid trio, Guppy, Jobling and Smallweed, we get just a little closer to a recognition of young men's lust, but it is only with Pip that the full awfulness of frustrated sexual longing is realised.

Love comes to Pip when he is too ignorant to know what it is.

> She put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry – I cannot hit upon the right name for the smart – God knows what its name was – that tears started in my eyes. The moment they sprang there, the girl looked at me with a quick delight in having been the cause of them. ...
>
> ... I looked about for a place to hide my face in, and got behind one of the gates in the brewery-lane, and leaned my sleeve against the wall there, and leaned my forehead on it and cried. As I cried, I kicked the wall, and took a hard twist at my hair, so bitter were my feelings, and so sharp was the smart without a name, that needed counteraction.
>
> (*GE* ch8 p92)

Pip, though expert in being humiliated, hurt and spurned, is hardly prepared for this treatment. He has none of the vocabulary of sentiment, so that when Miss Havisham whispers to Estella 'Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!' he appears not to know what she means. (*GE* ch12 p123) What with his ignorance and Miss Havisham's melodrama we might be tempted to doubt the reality of the sexual engagement between the two children if it were not

for Dickens's daring representation of Estella flushed with delight at seeing the boys fighting, and rewarding the victor with a furtive kiss. (*GE* ch11 p121)

Pip never has a chance to decide rationally that life at the forge is not for him. From the start, his disgust with the forge is bound up with his love for Estella and the sense she gives him of his own, and Joe's, clumsiness, dirtiness and coarseness. When he imagines Estella looking in through the forge window, he becomes conscious of all the things about himself which make her inaccessible, his blackened face and hands and his coarse work. (*GE* ch14 p136) Critics like Wilson and Johnson speak of him as a 'mean ... snob', a phrase which accurately describes his behaviour towards Joe, but hardly does justice to the complexity of his feelings.[1]

Part of Pip's discontent is due to being ashamed of Joe, and is mean and snobbish, but part of it is a more forgivable, or even laudable, longing for enlargement:

> ... I used to stand about the churchyard on Sunday evenings when night was falling, comparing my own perspective with the windy marsh view, and making out some likeness between them by thinking how flat and low both were, and how on both there came an unknown way and a dark mist and then the sea.
>
> (*GE* ch14 p135)

Pip is not the only one affected by this flatness. Mr Wopsle dreams of a life on the stage and Trabb's 'overgrown young man' (a reminder of what Pip might have become had he stayed) longs for 'variety and excitement'. (*GE* ch53 pp441-443) We can only speculate on the terrible frustrations that drive Mrs Joe on the rampage, and make her goad Joe to fight, as though his unchanging patience is to her like the endless flatness of the Marshes. She watches the fight as Estella did – and does she reward Joe as Estella rewarded Pip? Orlick expresses vividly what there is, ready to explode, beneath the surface quiet and idleness of life on the Marshes:

> ... I know'd you at Gargery's when you was so small a wolf that I could have took your weazen betwixt this finger and thumb and chucked you away dead (as I'd thoughts o' doing, odd times, when I see you loitering amongst the pollards on a Sunday) ...
>
> (*GE* ch53 p439)

---

1 Edmund Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges' p57; Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: his Triumph and Tragedy* p984.

Orlick has good reason to hate Pip the young man. His anger has a social dimension as the anger of the dispossessed, the man thrown out of work, the street ruffian, but if he was contemplating the murder of Pip the little boy, it suggests that there is more seething within him than merely social discontent. Violence, excitement, change, enlargement – it takes different forms, this longing to escape from the low, flat life of the Marshes, to break out of jail, like Pumblechook's seeds, and bloom. (*GE* ch8 p83)

Estella too wants to escape. She marries Drummle to escape a life she is weary of and which has few charms. (*GE* ch44 p377) She tries to justify her choice in these cool, rational terms, but doesn't make it convincing, even if we add a gloss about marriage being the only relief open to her. She says repeatedly that she has no heart, meaning that she doesn't comprehend Pip's sentiments and fancies. (*GE* ch44 p376) Consequently, because the official story about female sexuality is that it consists exclusively of sentiment and fancy, Dickens is left with nothing to explain the choice of Drummle except these weak rationalisations. Unless we refer back to the visible excitement of the little girl at the sight of the boys fighting, there is nothing in what Dickens tells us to suggest the plausible explanation that Estella sees in Drummle the same promise of darkness and violence that Jaggers sees, and chooses him for that reason.

As for Pip, his ideas of escape centre on Satis House:

> Whenever I watched the vessels standing out to sea with their white sails spread, I somehow thought of Miss Havisham and Estella; and whenever the light struck aslant, afar off, upon a cloud or sail or green hill-side or water line, it was just the same. – Miss Havisham and Estella and the strange house and the strange life appeared to have something to do with everything that was picturesque.
>
> (*GE* ch15 p137)

And so the most alluring form of escape that he can picture to himself is becoming like Estella and Miss Havisham, becoming a gentleman. The word *picturesque* reminds us that his aspirations are not crudely acquisitive and snobbish in their origin – his imagination also is engaged.

When he speaks of the 'clue by which I am to be followed into my poor labyrinth', he is referring not simply to his passion for Estella, but especially to its hopelessness, to the fact that he loves her against reason, despite knowing her character and knowing that she will not return his love. (*GE* ch29 p253) How much of his behaviour does he think is explained by this clue? He develops the point later: Estella is associated with the origins of his 'wretched hankerings' and is inseparable from the 'innermost life of my life'. (*GE* ch29 p257) Looking no further than the chapter in which these remarks occur, does the clue explain his vindictiveness against Orlick, or his forgetting his promise to Joe? To some extent it does. He wants to keep Orlick away from Estella, as he wants to keep him away from Biddy; and he neglects Joe in response to Estella's edict about 'fit company'. But the explanatory claim made by the word *clue* is rather lost in the impact of the remarkable and evocative *poor labyrinth*. The question remains of how central to Pip's history the love story really is. The felt motives for Pip's discontent and restless aspirations and much of his treachery towards Joe have to do with Estella, but this does not mean that the resolution of his problems depends on his relationship with her. By the end of the novel we feel that he has found a way out of his poor labyrinth, even though we do not know how the love story has ended.

There are several reasons for preferring the existing ending to the one rejected on Bulwer Lytton's advice. The most important has to do with what the original ending would tell us about Pip's relationship with Joe and Biddy, and will be discussed later in this chapter. The 'original' ending has usually been preferred as being, in Forster's words, 'more consistent with the drift, as well as the natural working out, of the tale'.[2] Butt and Tillotson quote from Dickens's memorandum on the final chapters, where he seems to emphasise that Pip's recovery depends on Herbert and on the one good deed of his prosperity, and conclude that it is 'more appropriate' that Pip should lose Estella.[3] Angus Calder argues that the revised

---

2 See Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* IX 3 vol 2 p289. The original ending is included in a footnote (p441).

3 *Dickens at Work* pp31ff.

ending 'muffles' this moral lesson and renders the novel's 'brooding tone of disillusionment ... more than slightly nonsensical'.[4] However the final words as published, 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her', are ambiguous. Estella's last reply is 'And will continue friends apart', which suggests that she expects this to be their final meeting and parting: the understanding they have reached will not be disturbed by a later meeting and a later parting. Or, on the other hand, perhaps they do marry. Dickens leaves it open to the reader to decide, rather than closing the option by making Estella marry the doctor who befriended her during her marriage to Drummle. What is important is that they have both got rid of their burden of portable property, and that they are reconciled. The longer, perhaps more portentous, exchange of words in the grounds of Satis House conveys a sense of reconciliation more clearly than the original version's hurried meeting in Piccadilly where we have to place a great deal of weight on Estella's look and touch, and the kiss she bestows on little Pip.

The power of money

Is Pip right to want to be a gentleman? Is he right to take the money? Is Magwitch right to give it him? Great unhappiness flows from Pip's sudden expectations: his arrogance and his enjoyment of flattery and the exercise of power, his insecurity, and his mistreatment of Joe and Biddy. All these are quite as inevitable as the extravagance and debts which Jaggers foresees (*GE* ch20 p194), but only the sternest moralist would say that Pip should have refused the money. It represents opportunity, and although we might deplore how little good use he makes of his wider opportunities, it is hard to feel he should have refused them altogether. The end product of Magwitch's benefaction and Matthew Pocket's instruction, the Pip who comes back after eleven years abroad, is probably a better person than a Pip who might have remained at the forge and grown up like Trabb's boy, and ended as another discontented Wopsle. How long would Joe's goodness have served to counteract Pip's discontent? How long before Pip's sexually driven aspirations

---

4 Appendix to the Penguin edition, p495f.

would have made him break ruinously free, as Emily breaks free from Mr Peggotty's clinging goodness?

We inevitably contrast Pip's eager acceptance of his good fortune with Joe's indignant refusal of the 'compensation' offered by Jaggers. (*GE* ch18) Joe sees instinctively that money handed out by Jaggers is tainted, whereas Pip only believes it when he is confronted with Magwitch. At this point Pip realises that money is tied to its past, and rejects the commonsense Wemmick view of *portability*:

> ... I do not think [Magwitch] could have been saved. Whereas, the portable property certainly could have been saved. That's the difference between the property and the owner, don't you see?
>
> (*GE* ch55 p461)

Not that Pip is absolute about this. He doesn't require Herbert to surrender the fruits of Magwitch's money and finds nothing abhorrent in topping it up with a slice of the brewer's fortune – but then there has always been about this transaction the saving fact that Herbert *doesn't know* he is being benefited. When we think of Joe's rejection of the money as an instinctive moral insight, we need to qualify this. He accepts Miss Havisham's premium, so why not Jaggers's? Perhaps it is because he no longer has to fear his wife's anger – but perhaps it is rather that his 'instinct' is socially conditioned: for a patron to pay an apprentice's premium is part of a traditional order of things, whereas Jaggers is offering something new and startling.

It is possible to be too pious about this. In the world as it is of course Pip must take the money. It is not just opportunity, it is power. The unwanted child at the forge is at everyone's mercy, while the owner of expectations has Trabb and Pumblechook grovelling for his favour. He feels what Mr Dombey felt, that money makes him a great man. Jaggers will still assert his lawyer's power by bullying him, but never as ruthlessly as he bullies his criminals and street loungers. Estella still has no heart for him, but money has given him the right to travel in a coach with her, and she plays cards with him without protesting at his hands and language. Herbert would always have treated the blacksmith's boy graciously, but it is money that gives Pip the right, and the ability, to speak with him as an equal.

Her fortune patently brought wretchedness to Miss Havisham, and Bentley Drummle's family's wealth does not prevent him being a booby. We can only speculate on the difference his 'cool' four thousand pounds makes to Matthew Pocket's happiness, but without doubt, the convict's money saves Herbert.

There is in Pip a strain of ruthlessness which enables him to speak with unreserved pleasure of the death, first of Mr Wopsle's aunt, and later of Clara Barley's father. (*GE* ch16 p150; ch55 p460). Both are inconvenient and disagreeable, standing in the way of characters with whom we and Pip heartily sympathise, but there is none of the spirit of forgiveness, the softened memory which Pip achieves as he walks home beside the fields of beans and clover thinking of his dead sister. (*GE* ch35 p298) Instead there is the harsh realisation that our happiness is built on the sacrifice of others, the amoral realism expressed by the Newgate gatekeeper and the jack at the inn who unconcernedly dress themselves in dead men's clothes. (*GE*ch20 p190; ch54 p451) One of the things that money seems able to do is mimic the power of death to eliminate the inconvenience of other people. Pip's servant, the Avenger, is a great trouble to him, but in the end Pip is master and can pay him off. Eventually even Trabb's boy is neutralised by a tip. But while Orlick too can be dismissed from his job, he cannot be driven from the country, although Pip declares he would spend any money to achieve that. (*GE* ch35 p303) And just as money will not save Pip from Orlick's real hatred, so it cannot save him from Joe's real love: 'If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money.' (*GE* ch27 p240)

Pip the gentleman

Insofar as his desire to be a gentleman is a wish to get away from dependence and an unhappy home, it is entirely understandable. How could anyone not want to escape from Mrs Joe, Tickler and Pumblechook? But more than that, there is something about Pip that gives added point to his desire, or need, to get away. It is not that he is unconvincing as a portrait of a coarse village boy (as perhaps Oliver Twist fails to convince as a workhouse boy), but Dickens presents him as, in a

sense, gentleman-material. A different child, a more phlegmatic, less observant and sensitive child, though he would still have been guilty of some sleeplessness and illness, might have irritated Mrs Joe less, asked fewer questions, found more favour with Pumblechook.

When he has already gathered enough scraps of food to satisfy the convict's demand, Pip, like Oliver, goes back for more, goes back, despite his fear and hurry, for the pork pie. This may not be generosity so much as the impulsive reaction of a boy intent on making extra sure he does not have his liver torn out, but there is a boldness about it, which, taken together with his gladness in the convict's enjoyment of the food, suggests a generous nature. (*GE* ch2 47; ch3 pp48&50) No doubt it is because this extra gift is, in a sense, free and unforced, that it weighs particularly on his conscience and is what he hears the cattle on the Marshes accusing him of stealing. After his first visit to Satis House, Pip feels unable to give an accurate account of Miss Havisham because it would be 'coarse and treacherous'. (*GE* ch9 p95) Here *coarse* is a sign that he is already learning to judge through Estella's eyes, but *treacherous* suggests a delicacy which understands his sister's small-mindedness and her sordid expectation of ill-defined gain. This is part of the unusual sensitivity, the quickness to see through the often pointless falsehoods of the adult world, which Pip attributes to his early experience of injustice. (*GE* ch8 p92) It is also a moment of panic: the truth is incomprehensible, and he falls back on images of splendour that he feels will be more acceptable to his sister and to Pumblechook. The result is his series of audacious lies about dogs and veal-cutlets. When Miss Havisham tells him to sing, his immediate response is to sing the blacksmith's song, *Old Clem*. He gives without reserve something of himself, and because of the song's connection with the forge, lays open his vulnerable side – resulting in this astonishing scene:

> It happened so to catch her fancy, that she took it up in a low brooding voice as if she were singing in her sleep. After that, it became customary with us to have it as we moved about, and Estella would often join in; though the whole strain was so subdued, even when there were three of us, that it made less noise in the grim old house than the lightest breath of wind.
>
> (*GE* ch12 p124)

We hear much about how Pip is affected by Satis House, but less about the effect of moments like this upon Estella and Miss Havisham. Pip doesn't convert them into a loving girl and benevolent old woman, but he plainly makes an impression. Estella, apparently for the sake of their childhood connection, treats him differently from other young men; and he eventually persuades Miss Havisham to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving Pockets. Perhaps the clearest sign that he has found a place in the old woman's heart is the moving moment when he taps in his old way on her door and she recognises 'Pip's rap'. (*GE* ch29 p256)

So strong is our sense of Pip as a generous, sensitive and attractive boy, that we almost feel as though his coarseness and commonness will wash off – as the dirt of the Dover Road is washed off David Copperfield to reveal the little gentleman beneath: 'I am David Copperfield, of Blunderstone, in Suffolk.' (*D*Cch13 p247) We are left with a half-formed thought that perhaps, like Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, Pip might be of gentle birth, just fallen on hard times, so that the money serves to restore him to his rightful place.[5] But unlike Oliver and David, he does not settle easily into his genteel life. On the first evening at Barnard's Inn, Herbert corrects some of his *faux pas* in a tactful and sympathetic way. Herbert's first intervention is in the matter of how to hold a knife, fork and spoon, where Pip is evidently ignorant, but his two subsequent tips do not suggest simple ignorance on Pip's part so much as awkwardness and embarrassment. (*GE* ch22) Learning a new social role is not a mechanical matter. Picking up the rules of good behaviour, foreign languages and literary taste is comparatively painless, but acquiring the ease and assurance of the born and bred gentleman is harder. Pip cannot start right from the beginning and write off the timidity and shame acquired in his unhappy childhood: he cannot manage his servant, he lives in fear of exposure as a

5 When a character announces, as Pip does at the beginning of the story, that he knows nothing whatsoever of his parents, the experienced novel-reader is alerted to expect revelations. Circumstances such as the similarity Pip observes between his sister and Camilla, and the recurrence of the name Georgiana seem to hint at a possible connection with the Havisham-Pocket family. (*GE* ch11)

blacksmith's boy and as one who consorts with convicts, and he is unable to resolve his relationship with Joe.

Pip and the forge

We have considered a number of reasons tending to support Pip's project of becoming a gentleman. The reasons against have mainly to do with the progressive alienation from Joe. Most of his self-recrimination focuses on his mistreatment of Joe. As with his insistence on the central importance of his love for Estella, we must not take uncritically his testimony against himself. A child brought up to feel himself to be 'naterally wicious' is likely to have in later life an overactive conscience and a tendency to self-denigration. (*GE*ch4 p57) Further, his willingness to blame himself is not only natural, but right. It is one thing for us to exonerate Pip, but we don't want him to exonerate himself. We admire his willingness, his eagerness, to blame himself, much as he admires Magwitch for doing nothing to 'bend the past out of its eternal shape'. (*GE* ch56 p465)

As early as Joe's visit to Satis House we can see Pip undergoing the torment of the sensitive child ashamed of his elders.

> 'Which it is well beknown to yourself, Pip,' returned Joe, strengthening his former mixture of argumentation, confidence, and politeness, 'that it were the wish of your own hart.' (I saw the idea suddenly break upon him that he would adapt his epitaph to the occasion, before he went on to say) 'And there weren't no objection on your part, and Pip it were the great wish of your hart!'
>
> (*GE* ch13 p128)

This moment in which Pip predicts what Joe will say next marks an irreversible change in their relationship, as Joe becomes for him an object of observation and understanding. The exceptional circumstances of the visit to Satis House are a dramatic heightening of this ordinary experience of growing up.

Even later, when Joe comes to Barnard's Inn, Pip's reaction is still understandable. That a young man newly precipitated into polite society, unsure of himself and conscious of the ruthlessness of the class in which he longs to find acceptance, should be anxious to avoid association with Joe seems entirely reasonable. That he should prevaricate and not know his own mind is also

understandable. Placed in an impossible situation, inexperienced and with no-one to guide him, he panics – it is the veal-cutlets over again. Or rather he is not quite the confused innocent that he was in the matter of the veal-cutlets: he is older, he is not entirely without guidance since Herbert is there to set an example of true gentlemanly ease, and there is not in this case the touch of generosity that motivated the stories of the veal-cutlets.

Pip's treatment of Joe becomes less pardonable.

> Never had I breathed, and never would I breathe – or so I resolved – a word of Estella to Provis. But, I said to Herbert that before I could go abroad, I must see both Estella and Miss Havisham. ...
>
> ... Next day, I had the meanness to feign that I was under a binding promise to go down to Joe; but I was capable of almost any meanness towards Joe or his name.
> (*GE* ch43 pp367f)

The self-condemnation here is harsh, and might seem out of proportion with the offence. After all, what harm is done to Joe by this use of his name? For Pip the narrator, dishonesty in human relations is the great sin – in particular his own repeated self-deception, his ability to pass false coins to himself. (*GE* ch28 p247) He reserves for the hypocritical Pumblechook, whom we might be inclined to regard as a harmless old fool, some of his most violent language. This intense preoccupation is seen in an aside in the account of Pip's last interview with Miss Havisham where he denounces the vanities of sorrow, penitence, remorse and unworthiness with a harshness and stridency that make the passage stand out from its surroundings. (*GE* ch49 p411)

Pip's use of Joe's name to explain his absence to Provis is particularly mean because of the motive for the lie. To mention Estella to Provis is somehow to sully her, as when he went into her presence with the 'the soiling consciousness of Mr Wemmick's conservatory' (that is, Newgate) still upon him. (*GE* ch32 p284) But what of Joe's name? Is Joe sullied by the mention of his name to the convict? When Pip first tells Biddy of his longing to become a gentleman, he says that if he could remain satisfied with being a blacksmith he would still be good enough for her, and she responds to this implied contempt by saying ironically that she is not 'over-

particular'. (*GE* ch17 p155) The same contempt is at work in Pip's assumption that he need not be over-particular in the use he makes of Joe's name.

This touches on the heart of Pip's attitude to the work of the forge, his assumption that the man, however honest, who works with his hands and gets dirty is closer to the convict than the gentleman. There are two sides of his 'low' life before his expectations, his dirty work and his consorting with convicts. We would say that there is, in fact, nothing for him to be ashamed of in either of these, but he is ashamed of both – ashamed of them, too, in much the same way. He says he would not have confessed to his visit to Newgate for any consideration, because it would disgust Estella, much as in earlier days he felt that his blackened face and hands would disgust her and make her despise him. (*GE* ch33 p289; ch14 p136) However much we sympathise with Pip's conviction that he will 'never like Joe's trade' (*GE* ch13 p134), or feel that his intelligence and sensitivity would not have been developed down on the Marshes, it is impossible to isolate these rational, even noble, aspirations from the irrational idea that dirty work is shameful.

Nineteenth century literature abounds in references to the degradation of manual labour and suggestions that manual workers are a separate, lower species. These ideas range from the middle-class girl's 'mortal fear of men of the lower orders', which Rhoda Broughton ridicules but plainly expects her readers to recognise,[6] to George Eliot's insistence, in 'The Natural History of German Life,' on the 'coarse apathy' of the peasant and the 'suspicious selfishness' of the artisan.[7] Mrs Gaskell seeing individual faces in the crowd, or Hardy penetrating to the individuality that lies behind the generalised 'Hodge' are rare exceptions. George Eliot is correcting the idyllic view of peasant life – approach nearer, she says, and see the truth about peasants and labourers. But how near must we approach? Is a 'neighbouring lane' close enough? Not, according to Hardy:

> Differing one from another in natures and moods so greatly as they did, they yet formed, bending, a curiously uniform row – automatic, noiseless; and an alien

6 *Not Wisely but Too Well* (1867; Stroud, 1993) ch21 p181.
7 *Westminster Review* July 1856 p55.

> observer passing down the neighbouring lane might well have been excused for massing them as 'Hodge'. As they crept along, stooping low to discern the plant, a soft yellow gleam was reflected from the buttercups into their shaded faces, giving them an elfish, moonlit aspect, though the sun was pouring upon their backs in all the strength of noon.
>
> (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* ch22 p178)

The starting point for George Eliot and Hardy is that there are separate worlds, and they pose the anthropologist's question of how, and to what extent, the one can understand the other, observing from the outside. In *Great Expectations* the image of the external observer looking in takes on a more alarming and intimate significance. Pip is tormented by the dread and hope that Estella might look in upon him (*GE* ch14 p136), but when he is on the other side of the glass the feelings of the observed are forgotten, and he describes the scene as though it were a picture –

> Early in the morning, I was out, and looking in, unseen, at one of the wooden windows of the forge. There I stood, for minutes, looking at Joe, already at work, with a glow of health and strength upon his face that made it show as if the bright sun of the life in store for him were shining on it.
>
> (*GE* ch35 p304)

– and as though Joe were a mere icon of honest healthy toil, like the harmonious locksmith of *Barnaby Rudge*. (*BR* ch41 pp381f)

At this stage, Pip cannot overcome the barrier between himself and his past, except by the exaggerated gesture of shaking Joe's 'blackened hand'. It is only near the end that we have a description of the forge in which we feel that Pip accepts it as part of himself:

> ... the forge was a very short distance off, and I went towards it under the sweet green limes, listening for the clink of Joe's hammer. Long after I ought to have heard it, and long after I had fancied I heard it and found it but a fancy, all was still. The limes were there, and the white thorns were there, and the chestnut-trees were there, and their leaves rustled harmoniously when I stopped to listen; but, the clink of Joe's hammer was not in the midsummer wind.
>
> (*GE* ch58 p486)

In thinking about what Pip leaves behind when he goes to London, we should not concentrate on an abstraction, the Forge. Rough physical work in forge or factory or on the land in company with uncouth and violent men like Orlick, or even the mere fact of being an employee, might well, in general, have a demoralising effect, whether it is the utter brutalisation which Engels discerns among the industrial

proletariat, or the idle loafing of Trabb's overgrown young man, or the split personality which is Wemmick's device for salvaging what he can of self-respect and humanity. But Gargery's forge is not like this. Joe will not treat Pip as Trabb treats his boy. Supposing we can understand and forgive Pip's rejection of the common coarse life in general, can we so readily condone his rejection of Joe?

Joe

One approach is to say that what is wrong is the *manner* in which Pip rejects Joe, the awkwardness, harshness and hypocrisy which characterise his dealings with him – as though there are gentle, easy and sincere ways of rejecting our early companions. But Dickens goes further than this. He represents Pip's progress, his alienation from Joe, as a falling from grace.

In order to vindicate Pip's project of becoming a gentleman, Mrs Leavis emphasises the limitations of life on the Marshes, and assumes that this requires her to de-value Joe's sort of goodness.

> ... education and the society of educated people with high standards of integrity like Matthew and Herbert Pocket, represent, other things being equal, a more desirable social habitat than a village-market-town society of Gargerys, Wopsles, Trabbs, Pumblechooks, Hubbles and Orlicks. Dickens has intimated that there are real distinctions to be made, based not on money or birth but on cultivation and intelligence and talent.
>
> (*Dickens the Novelist* ch6 p422)

This remark is deeply unfair. It ignores the moral difference between Joe and Pumblechook, and it damns Joe by the company he keeps, without any comparable allusion to Mrs Pocket and the Finches of the Grove.

Much turns on how we understand the phrase 'gentle Christian man'. (*GE* ch57 p472) In a novel where so much is said about being or becoming a gentleman this is plainly a significant reformulation. For Mrs Leavis the phrase represents 'an uneasy gesture of the novelist's towards making a special status for Joe'.[8] This special status is plainly to be regarded as socially and morally inferior to that of a Christian gentleman. Mrs Leavis makes fun of Joe's moral pronouncements, such

8 *Dickens the Novelist* ch6 p422.

as that 'Lies is lies'. She points out that Joe himself experiences the inadequacy of 'simple, wholesome rule-of-thumb morality' when he finds it 'as impossible as Pip had done to explain Miss Havisham to his wife ...' She concludes: 'Dickens really needs to make no comment on the inadequacy of simple-minded people thereafter. He has deliberately made his point thus, and it is unmistakable.'[9] However, our status as a moral agent and moral example does not depend to any large degree upon our ability to pronounce accurate moral truths. As a piece of moral philosophy, 'lies is lies ... so don't tell no more on 'em, Pip, and live well and die happy ...' (*GE* ch9 pp100f) is poor stuff. As a piece of comfort and advice to a confused and unhappy child it is, in Joe's tone of voice, probably as effective as anything could be. The 'ability' to utter and accept simple rule-of-thumb morality of a sort that cleverer people easily perceive to be false, is part of the virtue of being wrong which Dickens exemplifies in Sissy Jupe.[10]

Another piece of Joe's philosophising which Mrs Leavis regards as a crude over-simplification is his suggestion that people should stick to their own kind.

> 'Whether common ones as to callings and earnings,' pursued Joe, reflectively, 'mightn't be the better of continuing for to keep company with common ones, instead of going out to play with oncommon ones — which reminds me to hope that there were a flag, perhaps?'
>
> (*GE* ch9 p100)

It is easy to point out the limitations of this remark with its assumption of a feudal immutability of callings and earnings. But after we have criticised Joe's attempts at moral and social philosophy, we should look at the context and the form of what he says. The first thing to notice is that while the general validity of his comment might be questioned, the particular application, as a protest against the vulgarity of Mrs Joe and Pumblechook, is undoubtedly right.

But we can go further than this: *pursued Joe, reflectively* – the words might be read as expressing condescension and gentle mockery of the simple man puzzling

---

9 *Dickens the Novelist* ch6 p422-3.

10 Joe's most egregious falsehood, his epitaph for his father ('Whatsume'er the failings on his part, Remember reader he were that good in his hart.') recalls Sissy's unsupported belief in her father's goodness. (*GE* ch7 p77).

his head about matters that are beyond him. This would be in keeping with the earlier comment: 'This was a case of metaphysics, at least as difficult for Joe to deal with, as for me...' (*GE* ch9 p100) On this reading, Joe's self-interruption can be seen as an inability to concentrate on the point at issue. But if we take the words at their face value, we see Joe looking doggedly for an answer. The interruption then becomes not so much a lapse into irrelevancy as an attempt to bring into the discussion a different aspect of the problem. Joe's primary reason for hoping that there was a flag is that it would reduce the 'outdaciousness' of Pip's lies, but we should not forget his 'helpless amazement' at Pip's stories, his blue eyes rolling all round the kitchen. (*GE* ch9 p98) He wants Pip's stories to be true because of the pleasure that the idea gives him. The flags and swords and dogs and veal-cutlets appeal to his uncultivated imagination in the way that the tawdry shows of the horse-riders appeal to the deprived imagination of the Coketowners. The magical incoherence of Joe's speech allows Dickens to bring into juxtaposition two apparently conflicting truths: first that it is morally dangerous, and painful, to seek to be other than we are; and secondly that the longing of common people to experience the uncommon is an inescapable function of the imagination.

It is open to question whether Dickens is merely using Joe's incoherence to bring these ideas together, or whether he means that Joe, by being incoherent, is able to make moral connections which elude the articulate. My feeling is that in passages such as this we can feel that we are in contact with a delicate moral sensitivity which could hardly exist without the inarticulacy which all but hides it. Articulating the conflict in a grammatical form, as I have done, relieves it of some of the urgency which it has in Joe's speech.

It is impossible to leave consideration of this episode without referring to Joe's lovely benediction:

> No, old chap. But bearing in mind that them were which I meantersay of a stunning and outdacious sort – alluding to them which bordered on weal-cutlets and dog-fighting – a sincere well-wisher would adwise, Pip, their being dropped into your meditations, when you go up-stairs to bed. That's all, old chap, and don't never do

it no more.

(*GE* ch9 p101)

This has the same simple hieratic quality as Captain Cuttle's shrine in Florence's room. Surely Dickens could end the chapter on this uplifting note. But of course he doesn't. The next paragraph shows that moral uplift, even when pure and genuine, does not always work.

> When I got up to my little room and said my prayers, I did not forget Joe's recommendation, and yet my young mind was in that disturbed and unthankful state, that I thought long after I laid me down, how common Estella would consider Joe, a mere blacksmith: how thick his boots, and how coarse his hands.
>
> (*GE* ch9 p101)

It is the same later in the book. On the way to Mrs Joe's funeral, Pip achieves the sort of uplifting insight which ought, we feel, to put an end to all the disturbance and unthankfulness of his life:

> It was fine summer weather again,[11] and, as I walked along, the times when I was a little helpless creature, and my sister did not spare me, vividly returned. But they returned with a gentle tone upon them that softened even the edge of Tickler. For now, the very breath of the beans and clover whispered to my heart that the day must come when it would be well for my memory that others walking in the sunshine should be softened as they thought of me.
>
> (*GE* ch35 p298)

But before that chapter is out Pip has quarrelled with Biddy and made more false promises to Joe.

Something that is easy to ignore, something which Mrs Leavis's paper ignores, is that Joe is not a static character. The development from foolish good-nature to gentle Christian man is, certainly, an index of the intensification of Pip's appreciation of Joe's worth, but that's not all it is. For Pip, when Joe tends him in his illness, it is like a return to childhood: 'as if I were still the small helpless creature to whom he had so abundantly given the wealth of his great nature' (*GE* ch57 p476) – a warm tribute, but an underestimate. It was one thing for Joe to extend protection to a helpless child in his own home; it is quite another to do the same to Pip the gentleman in London. We know from the earlier visit how difficult Joe found London then. Now he takes it in his stride. It is hard to imagine the

---

[11] Why *again*? We don't know precisely what Pip is comparing it with, but *again* subtly reinforces the idea of memory flooding in upon him as he walks home.

husband of Mrs Joe paying off the thieving laundress. Managing servants is an important skill in Dickens's novels, and Joe here shows himself a more effective gentleman than Matthew Pocket. The magnitude of his achievement is symbolised by the fact that he has learnt to write. Pip's description of Joe writing a letter is humorous and loving, without being patronising – quite a remarkable feat – but it fails to mention the most important point. Writing a letter is not a picturesque incidental embellishment of Joe's character, but an essential part of his new-found ability to function at a distance from home.

Joe's new efficiency invites comparison with Mr Peggotty's unexpected powers of adaptation and survival in unfamiliar surroundings. The change in Joe is less extreme than in Mr Peggotty, and less sudden. We are prepared for it by the knowledge that, from the beginning, he has been capable of resisting the limitations of his background: even what seems like weakness, his helplessness against Mrs Joe, is the consequence of a conscious decision not to be like his drunken, violent father. (*GE* ch7) When he and Pip talk over the past it appears that he regulated his behaviour so as to minimise Pip's suffering with a degree of self-awareness that is hardly compatible with the idea of the 'easy-going, foolish, dear fellow' of Pip's memories. (*GE* ch2 p40) Along the way, he has not always been able to maintain his autonomy in action, his 'power being not always fully equal to [his] intentions' (*GE* ch57), and there being occasions when Mrs Joe or the demands of the world de-humanise him by putting him in his Sunday clothes.

This loss of autonomy culminates with Mrs Joe's funeral, when Trabb & Co put in 'a funereal execution' and take possession. There we see Joe 'entangled in a little black cloak tied in a large bow under his chin' meditating on how he would have preferred to bury his poor wife. (*GE* ch35 p298) Then, after the funeral he changes into something which, in all the descriptions of his clothes that there have been in earlier chapters, has never been offered as a possibility, a *compromise* 'between his Sunday dress and his working dress: in which the dear fellow looked natural, and

like the Man he was'. (*GE* ch35 p301)[12] When we next meet him, in London at Pip's bedside, there is no need to talk about his clothes. Joe's foolish good-nature turns out not to be a place of refuge, but a stronghold from which, when the time comes, he finds he can go out to do his duty in the world.

In some of his wise simpletons, Dickens pushes the balance too far in one direction or the other. We have to take Betsey Trotwood's word for Mr Dick's wisdom, while Sissy Jupe is not very foolish at all, because the things like M'Choakumchild's 'stutterings' which she doesn't understand are nonsense which she is right to find incomprehensible. In Joe both the simplicity and the wisdom are given their full measure. The question remains, what we should make of Dickens's penchant for wise simpletons. Does he mean to suggest that real wisdom, real moral insight, is only open to the simple?

Sissy, Mr Dick, Captain Cuttle and Jenny Wren all intervene at a point when their friends' emotional lives have become hopelessly tangled and when conventional thought and propriety have no solution to offer. Mr Dick draws the Doctor's attention to his wife's wretchedness at a moment when others are reticent. (*DC* ch45 p724) Sissy goes to Harthouse's room and routs him with her 'child-like ingenuousness ... her truthfulness which put all artifice aside ...' (*HT* III 2 p253) Captain Cuttle's tactlessness overcomes the scruples that threaten to keep Walter and Florence apart. Jenny 'discovers' that the solution for Eugene is to make Lizzie his wife (*OMF* IV 10: 'The Dolls' Dressmaker Discovers a Word'). The emphasis is upon action, but Dickens seems to feel that there is some special insight which goes with simplicity. From this it is easy to slide into a sort of irrationalism, a valuing of heart over head, and a belief that human affairs are not amenable to intelligent thought. Does Dickens slide too far in this direction? The novelist, almost by definition, treats cases where ordinary commonsense and conventional wisdom

12 Note the move from *dear fellow* to *Man*. There is a hint of patronage in *dear fellow*, and the capital M in *Man* suggests the same inclination to turn Joe into an emblematic figure that we sense when Pip looks in upon him through the forge window. Above all, we see Pip groping for the right description for Joe, much as Joe repeatedly slides between 'Pip' and 'Sir'.

break down, and where the way is open for the intervention of someone unburdened by commonsense. A provisional defence of Dickens against charges of irrationalism might be based on the suggestion that simply by writing a novel he is expressing a faith that ordinary commonsense readers can, like Betsey Trotwood, arrive through discursive thought at conclusions which come to the Mr Dicks of the world by immediate insight.

The whole discussion of Joe has assumed that he is indeed a simpleton, but it is tempting also to see him, in a world peopled by the likes of his wife and Miss Havisham, women driven mad with disappointment, by the murderous Orlick, and by fools like Pumblechook and Hubble, as the one sane man. Jaggers regards him as the village idiot, and goads him to incoherent belligerence, but which in truth is the more absurd, Joe's angry refusal of money and trembling touch on Pip's shoulder, or Jaggers's posturing? Jaggers stands with one foot on the seat of a chair, throwing his finger sideways at Pip. He regards the child with 'bullying suspicion':

> 'No, my young friend,' he interrupted, shaking his head and frowning and smiling both at once; 'no, no, no; it's very well done, but it won't do; you are too young to fix me with it. Recommendation is not the word, Mr Pip. Try another.'
>
> (*GE* ch18 p167)

Then he counts out his twenty guineas, and sits swinging his long purse. It is all a practised routine, no doubt, done for effect, to intimidate, but on the surface at least this is not entirely sane behaviour And yet in the world that Pip is going to Jaggers is considered a great man.

At the end of the book, Joe returns to the theme of Tickler 'in his favourite argumentative way', and gives an account of his own behaviour:

> For when your poor sister had a mind to drop into you, it were not so much ... that she dropped into me too, if I put myself in opposition to her, but that she dropped into you always heavier for it. I noticed that. It ain't a grab at a man's whisker, nor yet a shake or two of a man (to which your sister was quite welcome), that 'ud put a man off from getting a little child out of punishment. But when that little child is dropped into, heavier, for that grab of whisker or shaking, then that man naterally up and says to himself, 'Where is the good as you are a doing? I grant you I see the 'arm,' says the man, 'but I don't see the good. I call upon you, sir, theerfore, to pint out the good.'
>
> (*GE* ch57 p478)

This level of articulacy is due in part to Biddy's coaching, but it points to a degree of self-awareness in Joe. But despite this recognition of his wife's unreasonable violence, Joe retains his fixed view of her as 'a fine figure of a woman'. Both here and in his view of his father as 'that good in his hart' Joe follows the message of the beans and clover, softening the truth. The simpleton uses platitudes all his life to defend the moral insight which Pip only attains in a moments of intense and unusual emotion.

The benefactors

Great Expectations tells the story of two fortunes. One is the straightforward Havisham family brewing fortune, the other is Magwitch's colonial fortune, acquired, one might feel, with mysterious rapidity. (How much more convenient if Dickens's chronology had allowed him to take advantage of the gold diggings.) There is no suggestion that Magwitch made his money by anything but hard work and good luck (he speaks of having 'spec'lated and got rich' (*GE* ch39 p337)), but both Pip and Herbert take it for granted that it is impossible to accept his money. Because of who Magwitch is, because of his past ('Think of him! Look at him!' (*GE* ch41 p357)) his money is tainted, in a way that the brewer's money is not, even though we are reminded that brewers' fortunes rest upon those who perform the ungentlemanly occupation of keeping a public house. (*GE* ch22 p203)

Both fortunes are dissipated by the end of the story, Miss Havisham's swallowed up by Drummle's debts, and Magwitch's forfeit to the crown. Neither Estella nor Pip makes any attempt to hang on to their burdensome portable property, and it seems as though their eventual reconciliation and redemption follow from their loss.

They lose their money, but retain their gentility and education. For good or ill, there is much that they cannot shake off, and they will remain what money made them. Pip is a credit to his gentlemanly education. Perhaps we should take a harsh view of his liking for foreign literature and read a world of immorality into the

information that the Finches meet in Covent Garden (*GE* ch34 p292), and certainly he is foolish and extravagant and influenced by false ideas of class, but still, even if we give also full value to the idea that in alienating himself from Joe he is falling from grace, it is hard to feel that Pip is a vicious young man. With Estella the case is different. She has been deliberately corrupted by Miss Havisham. She is unhappy and determined to cause unhappiness to others. But then we have to remember what she would have been if Miss Havisham had not taken her into her home. She belongs by birth to the underclass of criminals and prostitutes, where she might have been just as cruel and unhappy, and where she might have suffered something as bad as her marriage to Drummle.

The money that is spent on these two young people is not entirely misspent. Dickens is always alive to the good that money can do. Saving Pip from ignorance and Estella from prostitution are admirable uses for the fortunes of convict and brewer. However, Magwitch in his ignorance demands that Pip should be prepared for no useful life. That his 'brought-up London gentleman' should be 'above work' is essential to his triumph over the 'judge in his wig [and] the colonist stirring up the dust'. (*GE* ch39 pp337ff; ch40 p347) It is an extreme form of the nineteenth century phenomenon of the self-made man sending his son to school to learn Latin verse. There is something repellent in Magwitch's bitter determination to get the better, through Pip, of the gentlemen who have oppressed him, but also much that is moving and admirable in the convict who recalls the child who looked kindly on him, the vermin who puts his faith in the idea that there must be a better way of life than his.

We might say that it is hardly necessary to calculate the balance of good and evil in Magwitch's motivation or in the consequences for Pip: whatever the motive, whatever the results, it is offensive for a one person to buy up and re-make another. What is interesting is that Dickens does not seem to take this view. What Pip and Miss Havisham do for the good Pockets, Herbert and Matthew, is an example of a good use of money, but Dickens's idea of good money doesn't end there. Pip's

delusion that Miss Havisham intends to bring him and Estella together is a delusion – that was never Miss Havisham's plan, and she has formed Estella for quite other purposes – but there is no suggestion that if that were what Miss Havisham planned it would be entirely wrong. This will be discussed in my final chapter in the context of mercenary marriages. Dickens realises that wealthy benefactors cannot manipulate the emotional lives of their clients, but I suspect that he half wishes that they could.

Biddy

Pip survives three brushes with death, in the fire, in the lime-pit and in the river. He watches over Magwitch's last days and learns to accept him and, by implication, to accept his own low origins. He is then ill, and reverts to childish dependence on Joe. But his merely symbolic resurrection and enlightenment through repeated ordeals are not enough. Pip must work if he is to progress on the road to manhood and independence. Given that he must work, why should he not go back down to the Marshes and work in the forge? No doubt he still has 'the arm of a blacksmith'. (*GE* ch23 p218)

In Mrs Leavis's view, the crucial obstacle is that for one accustomed to reading and discussing the literature of all lands and ages, evenings spent across the fireside from Joe and Biddy, or at the Jolly Bargeman, would be intolerable. She goes to some lengths to prove that Biddy is not fit company for Pip. What she says about the attainments required of a village schoolmistress is no doubt true enough, but then Biddy is no more a representative schoolmistress than Joe is a representative blacksmith. She is as much in advance of her predecessor, Mr Wopsle's great-aunt, as Joe is of his drunken blacksmith father. There is, perhaps, a danger that Biddy and Joe might treat Pip's learning with something of the philistine admiration exhibited by Magwitch. Mrs Leavis is right to emphasise that there are differences which are 'real' and are not matters of mere snobbery, but her argument does not help in disentangling one sort of difference from the other. After a brief reference to the limited curriculum of a village school, she discusses

the ambiguity of the position of schoolmistress in the village pecking order, and concludes:

> Biddy would neither have dressed nor spoken like a lady, her hands would have been coarsened by rough work as Mrs Joe's substitute ... and unlike Pip Biddy is shown to have taken to the Hubble and Gargery households as congenial enough. For all these reasons (and more) there *was* a real barrier between Biddy and Herbert's Handel which had nothing to do with 'snobbery' unless any manifestation of real differences that are more than merely social in fact though classified for convenience under that head, are to be dismissed thus. ... Dickens assumes the reader understands all this, and of course his readers did, 'Biddy' inevitably suggesting to them the Irish peasant.
>
> (*Dickens the Novelist* ch6 p424n)

These sociological comments are vividly confirmed in Mrs Oliphant's *The Curate in Charge* (1875), but they are less relevant than the evidence we have of the quality of Biddy's mind. Coarse hands or not, her exchanges with Pip are some of the most convincing examples in Dickens of genuine conversational give and take. In the quarrel following Mrs Joe's funeral she uses her intelligence to resist Pip's 'virtuously self-asserting manner' and to lead him into 'more temperate talk', while neither yielding to him nor giving herself away. (*GE* ch35 p303)

The real reason why Pip cannot go back to Joe and Biddy is the consciousness, on both sides, of what has gone before, a history summed up in his careless assumption that if he returns to the Forge he will again be the centre of life there. He thinks he is returning to seek forgiveness, '... like a forgiven child (and indeed I am as sorry ... and have as much need of a hushing voice and a soothing hand) ...' (*GE* ch57 p481) This is bad enough: the ménage he envisages would be like that of John and Harriet Carker, with the hushing, forgiving voice a daily necessity. But in fact he is asking more than just forgiveness. Taking notice at long last of the fact that Biddy 'once liked [him] very well', (*GE* ch57 p481) he expects her to have waited for him.[13]

---

[13] That good and true young women, once they have given their heart, should never withdraw it and bestow it elsewhere, is a hypothesis common enough in mid-Victorian literature, with Trollope's Lily Dale its leading exponent. It is, of course, a slippery hypothesis, because we can always decide (as Annie Strong asserts of her feelings for Maldon) that the young woman never brought herself to 'really love' the first man. (*DC* ch45 p729) Dickens finds no difficulty in Biddy's transfer of her heart from Pip to Joe, and has no inclination to claim that her love for either of them was not real.

The assumption that he will return as the centre of the life at the Forge has some truth. The marriage of Joe and Biddy, the two people who have loved Pip and been jilted by him, seems almost like an association for the preservation of his memory. Inevitably they name their child after him. Unmenaced by Tickler and Pumblechook, the new home has none of the vulgarity and violence of that in which our Pip was brought up by hand – Biddy's wedding ring has a 'light pressure' unlike the 'ridgy effect' of Mrs Joe's (*GE* ch59 p490; ch7 p82) – but still there is something to make us uneasy. What are we to make of Pip's request that his young namesake be given, or lent to him? (*GE* ch59 p490) Have Joe and Biddy produced a son just so that Pip can take him away to make him a gentleman? Does he think he can give the boy a better life amongst his merchant friends?

This is where we come up against a serious objection to the original ending. The final scene as originally written is a chance encounter between Estella, who has re-married, and Pip, who has Biddy's son with him. The little boy is lifted up to be kissed by Estella. Of course there is all the difference in the world between this kiss and that bestowed on Pip following his victory over the pale young gentleman, but unprovoked kisses from strange ladies come under the same heading as the tendency of 'large handed persons' to rumple children's hair – a habit which Pip studiously avoids when he meets his namesake. (*GE* ch10 p106; ch59 p490) When Estella says, 'Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!' she is using the child to make an emotional gesture of significance to her, without thinking of its possible significance to him. She is repeating, in a small way, the error of Miss Havisham and Magwitch.

When Pip asks Biddy to lend him little Pip, she prettily, but firmly, avoids a direct answer:

> Biddy looked down at her child, and put its little hand to her lips, and then put the good matronly hand with which she had touched it, into mine. There was something in the action and in the light pressure of Biddy's wedding-ring, that had a very pretty eloquence in it.
>
> (*GE* ch59 p490)

Biddy's gesture confirms that Pip is to keep in contact with his old friends at the forge, and show a loving interest in his namesake, but if the story of his expectations has taught us anything it is that there is danger in this contact. Joe's old warning about common ones and oncommon ones still holds. Biddy must make terms before she lends her child to Pip. Until we know the content of that 'pretty eloquence' this version of the final scene seems too glib and neat. Pip's intentions are not corrupt as Miss Havisham's were, and his tact and understanding are better than Magwitch's, but still we want to warn him off.

Merchants

The first essential step to manhood and independence that Pip must take is to pay off his debts. The general obligation to pay one's debts is made particularly urgent by the fact that Joe has settled with the creditors. Paying the money is at once essential and irrelevant:

> And when I say ... that I shall never rest until I have worked for the money with which you have kept me out of prison, and have sent it to you, don't think, dear Joe and Biddy, that if I could repay it a thousand times over, I suppose I could cancel a farthing of the debt I owe you, or that I would do so if I could!
>
> (*GE* ch58 p488)

There is in this a reference back to earlier occasions on which Pip behaved as though obligations could be cancelled by spending money, a repudiation of the 'penitential codfish and barrel of oysters' which he sends to Joe 'as reparation for not having gone myself'. (*GE* ch30 p267)

He recovers his self-respect by working for Herbert's firm. On a personal level this seems fitting. The opportunity comes to him as a direct result of the 'only good thing I had done, and the only completed thing I had done, since I was first apprised of my great expectations'. (*GE* ch52 p427) Buying the partnership for Herbert is undoubtedly, as Wemmick says, 'devilish good' of Pip (*GE* ch37 p314), but is it also another example of manipulating someone else's life by the power of money. Dickens's unqualified approval of this use of money recalls his unhesitating belief in the idea of seizing street children and saving them from a life of crime. Another uncomfortable question arising from this act is, Why does Pip

feel he has to be so circumspect about giving money to Herbert whereas he can offer it openly to Biddy and Joe? It would be easy to conclude that it is just because Herbert is a gentleman, with fine gentlemanly feelings, which Pip respects, whereas he does not take account of the scruples which made Joe angrily refuse Jaggers's offer of money. Such a conclusion might be unfair to Pip. Herbert's case is so much simpler, he is so very easy to manipulate. How could Pip ever have found a way of giving money to Biddy surreptitiously?

Apart from its origin in Pip's good deed, what is there to recommend the job with Clarriker and Pocket as a road to manhood and independence?

> I lived happily with Herbert and his wife, and lived frugally, and paid my debts, and maintained a constant correspondence with Biddy and Joe. ... I must not leave it to be supposed that we were ever a great House, or that we made mints of money. We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well. We owed so much to Herbert's ever cheerful industry and readiness, that I often wondered how I had conceived that old idea of his inaptitude, until I was one day enlightened by the reflection, that perhaps the inaptitude had never been in him at all, but had been in me.
>
> (*GE* ch58 p489)

This account is marked by a modesty which is absent when David Copperfield describes how he made good:

> ... whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well; ... whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; ... in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest. I have never believed it possible that any natural or improved ability can claim immunity from the companionship of the steady, plain, hard-working qualities, and hope to gain its end. ... there is no substitute for thorough-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness. Never to put one hand to anything, to which I could throw my whole self; and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was; I find, now, to have been my golden rules.
>
> How much of the practice I have just reduced to precept, I owe to Agnes, I will not repeat here. ...
>
> (*DC* ch42 p672)

Even where David acknowledges a debt to Agnes he fails to give any impression of how Agnes has helped him. The impression is rather of a strong and determined individual hacking his way through his difficulties, something almost like the 'shouldering' of Sidney Carton's friend Stryver. (*TTC* II 5 p116) Pip is involved with others, and is helped and supported by his involvement. He makes good with Herbert the relationship which he failed to establish, in the forge, with Joe:

> It was not because I was faithful, but because Joe was faithful, that I never ran away and went for a soldier or a sailor. It was not because I had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, but because Joe had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, that I worked with tolerable zeal against the grain. ... I know right well, that any good that intermixed itself with my apprenticeship came of plain contented Joe, and not of restlessly aspiring discontented me.
>
> (*GE* ch14 p135)

Pip's modesty, his generous appreciation of the worth of Joe and Herbert, and his dependence on them, ring true, but when he insists on the unpretentious scale of the Clarriker business ('Not in a grand way ... a good name ... worked for our profits...') there is something defensive in what he says. In the light of some of the practices discussed in my next chapter perhaps Dickens feels his readers might be suspicious about the way Pip and Herbert make their money. The defence takes the form of insisting on hard work, a good name and an absence of the sort of destructive ambition which ruins Dombey and Merdle, with no positive suggestion that the business is of any use to the world.

Being a merchant is simply assumed to be a useful occupation. There are good merchants (the Cheerybles and Walter Gay) and bad merchants like the Chuzzlewits, or in a different way, the Clennams, but they are good or bad as people rather than as merchants. James Carker is explicitly exonerated from charges of actual dishonesty in his business dealings. Insofar as merchants are merchants, they all presumably buy cheap and sell dear, but for Dickens, the Cheerybles, Chuzzlewits and Clennams are not just merchants. Their capacity for forgetting their business of buying cheap and selling dear is what makes the Cheerybles better than the Chuzzlewits and Clennams – they recognise non-business obligations. Perhaps this is what is behind Pip's account of the House of Clarriker: they didn't make a mint of money because they did not pursue profit to the exclusion of all other human considerations. It is as though in business it is better to avoid that single-minded pursuit of success advocated by David Copperfield, and exemplified by Mrs Clennam with her sinister blending of business and religion.

Pip's dedication to Clarriker's firm has a redemptive quality which it could hardly have if the work were immoral. Characters like Newman Noggs and Riah both seek redemption in doing bad work, but only find it fully when they leave their bad masters. Dickens's strong sense of the moral individuality of his characters prevents him from abstracting and asking what it is that makes a good or bad merchant, as opposed to what makes a good or bad person. There is both a vagueness and a grandness about the moral failure of his men of affairs. Merdle is 'the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows'. (*LD* II 25 p777) John Carker's stumbling and slipping becomes a headlong ruin (*D&S* ch13 p248), and where other writers might be interested in the gradual detail of the stumbling and slipping, Dickens sees a lurid picture of temptation and fall. Where he abstracts it is directly to the large moral ideas, rather than to the intermediate level which would enable him to analyse the complex morality of business life.

Wemmick

Not that his method debars him from having anything interesting to say on the world of affairs. The dinner parties of Dombey, Merdle and Veneering are admirable vehicles for his account of money, society and politics, but on the whole, when Dickens thinks of a man of affairs, he thinks of a lawyer.

Lawyers' offices fascinate him by their picturesqueness, their great age and the intense moral ambiguity of their atmosphere. The darkness of Mr Fips's 'mighty yellow-jaundiced little office' in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is in keeping with the dark secrets of the plot, and yet we never doubt that the peaceable little lawyer in 'black shorts and powder' is part of the mechanism that will illuminate and resolve the situation. (*MC* ch39 p684) Dickens is always interested in the idea of goodness lurking in an unlikely, uncongenial external setting, from Mr Pickwick, the angel in gaiters, to the angular Mr Grewgious in *Edwin Drood*. Incongruity and picturesque contrast become real conflict in his portraits of good servants of bad masters.

The bad master in Wemmick's case is not Jaggers himself, but rather the law, the system, the hangman, the judge and the portable property, and he never abandons them. There is in his case no satisfying final rupture as between Micawber and Heep, or Pancks and Casby. He is Jaggers's employee, and one reason why he is such an interesting character is that Dickens senses a difference between a servant and an employee. The servant, such as Newman Noggs or Riah, has an almost feudal dependence upon his master, an obligation inherited from an earlier generation. The bad deeds he does are not his, he is merely an instrument. Noggs, Riah and Pancks can assert their independence only by renouncing their allegiance once and for all, while Wemmick renounces his allegiance to Little Britain each day when he goes home, and takes it up again next morning. We have left the world of servants who, like Sam Weller or Mark Tapley, identify themselves entirely with their master, and who find fulfilment in service. This ideal of service is the equivalent, on a personal level, of the social theory that the class conflicts inherent in capitalism can be resolved by a 'return' to a mythical feudal society of mutually recognised obligations. Sam and Mark, of course, are first-class ironists and provide no evidence that Dickens takes the ideal of service at all seriously.

Lawyers' clerks like Guppy, and the commercial gentlemen at Todgers's, are likewise employees. As a class of men profoundly unsure of their status they are the butts of much satire, with their would-be gentlemanly talk. When discussing the way of life of the commercial gentlemen, we looked at a passage in Mark Rutherford's *Deliverance.* As that passage continues, Mark Rutherford describes how he copes with his uncongenial working conditions:

> Nobody knew anything about me, whether I was married or single, where I lived, or what I thought upon a single subject of any importance. I cut off my office life in this way from my life at home so completely that I was two selves, and my true self was not stained by contact with my other self. It was a comfort to me to think the moment the clock struck seven that my second self died, and that my first self suffered nothing by having anything to do with it. I was not the person who sat at the desk downstairs and endured the abominable talk of his colleagues and the ignominy of serving such a chief. I knew nothing about him. I was a citizen walking London streets; I had my opinions upon human beings and books; I was on equal terms with my friends; I was Ellen's husband; I was, in short, a man. By this scrupulous isolation, I preserved myself, and the clerk was not debarred from the

domain of freedom.

(*Mark Rutherford's Deliverance* ch8 p106)

Mark Rutherford seems to suggest that the clerk who disappears at seven o'clock is somehow less 'real' than the man who walks the streets and holds opinions and goes home to his wife. It would be nice to think the same about Wemmick, but Dickens doesn't encourage us in this. He seems to suggest, when Pip surprises Wemmick into revealing his Walworth life to Jaggers, that what is underneath the surface of businesslike hardness is in some sense the 'real' man, and that the hardness is only a mask, but for the victims and clients, the mask is real enough. The good son, the whimsical householder, the lover of Miss Skiffins, the dispenser of kindly commonsense advice, is no more the true Wemmick than the office bully, the frequenter of Newgate and accumulator of portable property. One thing about portable property is that it can be carried from Little Britain to Walworth. The coiner's pigeons, the juryman's fowl, the mourning rings, the collection of curiosities, all come home to the castle, as though to demonstrate that both sides of Wemmick's personality belong to the same real world.

The good man in a bad job is a figure that Dickens returns to again and again. Wemmick is the finest example for the same reason as Joe is finest example of Dickens's wise simpletons: because both sides are given their full value. We cannot doubt the reality of either the soft Wemmick at home in Walworth, or the hard Wemmick who is Jaggers's willing and conscious accomplice in Little Britain and Newgate:

> I don't know that Mr Jaggers does a better thing than the way in which he keeps himself so high. He's always so high. ... Then, between his height and them, he slips in his subordinate – don't you see? – and so he has 'em, soul and body.
>
> (*GE* ch32 p283)

The dirt in Little Britain is not quaint dirt like Mr Fips's 'black, sprawling splash ... as if some old clerk had cut his throat, years ago, and had let out ink instead of blood'. (*MC* ch39 p684) The dirt that gets under Mr Jaggers' fingernails, whether it is physical grime or a figment of his unconscious, does not belong to a whimsical 'years ago', but comes back day after day.

> The room was but small, and the clients seemed to have had a habit of backing up against the wall: the wall, especially opposite to Mr Jaggers's chair, being greasy with shoulders. I recalled, too, that the one-eyed gentleman had shuffled forth against the wall when I was the innocent cause of his being turned out.
>
> (*GE* ch20 p188)

Conclusion

There is in *Great Expectations* ample material for an indictment of an acquisitive and class-ridden society. The arguments that are put forward in mitigation of Pip's personal guilt do not absolve the society which speaks through Estella of ruthless class exclusiveness, and through Wemmick and Jaggers, Trabb and Pumblechook of the glories of money, and which imposes its false ideals upon Pip's impressionable mind. It would be hard not to see the social message. But the more we emphasise this social message and push it towards the centre of the novel, the more conscious we become of the weakness of the resolution. Pip's eleven years of exile, hard work and modest profits apparently bring him to manhood and independence, but they leave society exactly where it was – as Wemmick returns each morning from his domestic haven to take his place as Jaggers's subordinate. There is a fittingness about Pip's eleven years in Clarriker's firm in that it stems from his one good use of his money. Dickens does not use Clarriker in the arbitrary way in which he appoints Mr Micawber to his Australian magistracy, but it's hard not feel that he has taken up the idea of the modest merchant somewhat opportunistically, without giving much thought to what it involves.

There is one promise of social progress, the rise of Biddy and Joe, but even here there is little sense of the social context of Biddy's coming up at heel. The obstacles she overcomes are the chaos of the dame's school, the absence of proper teaching and intelligent conversation, her unsatisfactory relationship with Pip and the menacing courtship of Orlick. How the nation is to be provided with enough sympathetic young schoolmistresses, is a question Dickens doesn't ask here – nor does he face the fact here that such schoolmistresses, firmly placed on a level with higher servants in the rigid class system celebrated by Mrs Leavis, are likely to be timidly conformist, like Miss Peecher with her essays 'exactly a slate long ... strictly

according to rule'. (*OMF* II 1 p268) If the general social picture presented by the novel is of a society corrupted by money, class division and pretence, Biddy's becoming a schoolmistress is a small, unexamined quantity placed on the other side of the balance. Although the second Gargery household, with the new little Pip beside the fire, offers a hopeful prospect, there is a certain negative feeling, as though their life is defined by their refusal, right from the first evening when Joe rejects Jaggers's 'compensation', to take any advantage of Pip's good fortune.

When Pip relinquishes Magwitch's portable property he finds personal salvation in hard work, modest profits and shared domesticity. This is not the withdrawal into purposeless idleness which Orwell accuses Dickens of regarding as the ideal solution to a young man's troubles, but one can see what Orwell is getting at.[14] There is in Pip's exile a sense of disengagement from the world, with a future confined to paying debts and remembering – as low and flat a prospect, one feels, as any he had as a discontented boy on the Marshes. The great dynamic forces, the convict's fortune and Pip's aspirations, have come to nothing, and we are left with a sense of defeat.

The social problem posed by the novel is vast: the corrupting power of money and class. The social remedies offered are schoolmistresses and small business. On the level of individual character, too, the lesson of the book is a formula of Pumblechookian banality: be modest, grateful and mindful of mortality. Look at Pork. But great moral lessons are few and simple, and barely worth repeating. What is interesting is the way people struggle to live by such simple moral truths. To account for the peculiar power of *Great Expectations* you have to look not at the social and moral lessons, but at the vividness and variety of the account of Pip's struggle, and the balance that is achieved between its absurdity and nobility.

14 'Charles Dickens' p125.

Chapter 9: Respectable Men

Out of the mire

When Dickens attacks respectability it is the respectability of the middle-class male that he is aiming at. For women and the poor, unrespectability is so appalling that he hesitates to undermine the idea of their respectability. We shudder at the complacency of Bucket's advice to Liz when she despairingly wishes that her baby son could die: 'You train him up respectable, and he'll be a comfort to you, and look after you in your old age, you know.' Dickens himself is sometimes equally complacent – Bucket could be thinking of Kit Nubbles:

> And now, mother ... before I rest any more I'll go out and see if I can find a horse to hold, and then I can buy some birdseed and a bit of something nice for you, into the bargain.
>
> (*OCS* ch13 p162)

Mrs Nubbles is recognised by Mrs Garland as a 'very honest and very respectable person' and her respectability is taken as a guarantee of her son's. (*OCS* ch21 p221) She is a widow, and her husband when alive was good to her and had been a good son to his mother, which suggests a dominant feminine influence in the family – the children all 'strongly' resemble her (*OCS* ch21 p221; ch11 p131). This is significant, because as Liz says to Bucket it is the brutal father that is the barrier to the son's growing up respectable. (*BH* ch22 p367)

The lack of a masculine influence in the home is one aspect of the Nubbleses' apparent isolation from the social effects of poverty. Evil in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is personified by Quilp. Personified evil can be drowned at the end of the story, unlike the evil that is built into the conditions under which people live:

> Breathe the polluted air, foul with every impurity that is poisonous to health and life; and have every sense ... sickened and disgusted, and made a channel by which misery and death alone can enter. Vainly attempt to think of any simple plant, or flower, or wholesome weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves off to the sun as GOD designed it. And then, calling up some ghastly child, with stunted form and wicked face, hold forth on its unnatural sinfulness and lament its being, so early, far away from Heaven – but think a little of its having been conceived, and born and bred, in Hell!
>
> (*D&S* ch47 p737)

Liz apologises to Bucket for her subversive views, and he appears to have the better of their argument, but it is her statement of the difficulties, not his facile solution, that carries conviction. Not that Dickens believes that character is entirely determined by social conditions, by the Hell in which we are bred. Joe Gargery was brought up in precisely the conditions that Liz describes. But what Liz is telling Bucket is that such brutal surroundings are more likely to produce a 'ghastly child' than a man who is 'dead afeared of ... not doing what's right by a woman'. (*GE* ch7 p80)

But even supposing Liz achieves what Bucket suggests, she is likely to be disappointed. The desire of people who live in poverty to achieve a status that marks them off from those in slightly worse poverty is something which Dickens takes for granted and sees usually as a negative and divisive force. He mocks the pretensions of the Kenwigses and attacks the vicious ingratitude of Charley Hexam, who in his determination to be respectable turns his back on the two people to whom he owes his advance in life. (*NN* ch14; *OMF* II 15 pp460ff & IV 7 pp780f) Even the amiable Plornishes want to be better than their neighbours, their pretences taking the form of exaggerating the extent of the debts owed by their acquaintance Mr Dorrit. (*LD* I 12 p180)

Dickens cannot entirely dispense with respectability. In his account of the home for homeless women he says that the girls, when their time comes to leave, are sometimes 'placed under the charge of a respectable family of emigrants'.[1] Here Dickens is confronted with an urgent, overwhelming practical problem. In a novel he might find a Mr Peggotty to accompany an ex-prostitute to Australia; in real life he must make do with mere respectability, without enquiring too deeply into how affectionate or reliable the respectable family might turn out to be. It is not clear whether Dickens expects the respectable family to act as an example and a check, and so continue the process of reform, or to help the girl gain acceptance in society and find a husband. Perhaps we should not push the distinction too far,

1 'Home for Homeless Women', *MP* p374.

since in practical terms it is easier to behave respectably if you are treated as a respectable person. This unexamined ambiguity was fundamental to the relationship between the middle class and the lower orders, as exemplified by the idea of a servant's *character*.

The 'respectable family' is replaced at a higher level of society by the older companion who is considered essential as a guarantee of a young woman's character. Dickens does not probe this idea with the same relentlessness that we shall see in his treatment of masculine respectability. Less squeamish authors have much fun with the humbug of chaperonage. For example, in *The Widow Barnaby* (Fanny Trollope, 1839) the principal joke is that it's the young niece who provides the essential cloak of respectability behind which the middle-aged widow pursues her amorous campaigns; and in *The Fatal Three* (Mary Braddon, 1888) the plot arises out of two incidents in which chaperones behave towards their charges with the irresponsibility which we shall see displayed by the respectable directors of dishonest businesses. For Dickens the issues involved in chaperonage are slightly different, perhaps more serious. His objection to Mrs General is that her varnish prevents her from offering any proper womanly sympathy to Amy and Fanny. Most young Dickensian heroines are too good to require the trappings of respectability, are better than the parents or guardians who should be guiding and protecting them. Dickens's criticism of the supposed protectors of young women is that they permit, or actively promote, unsuitable marriages.

The role of the respectable woman (the latter-day Mrs Nubbles, though without the religion) in the drive towards self-improvement is acknowledged in two articles in *All the Year Round* on the Post Office Savings Bank.[2] In both, it is the wife who persuades her good-natured but irresponsible husband to be provident. Membership of a well-run provident society is offered a 'safe test of who are really the striving and industrious poor'.[3] Respectability here is an instrument of social

2 'My Account with Her Majesty' and 'Exceedingly Odd Fellows', *AYR*, 5 March and 16 April 1864.

3 'Parish Charities', *AYR*, 23 May 1863 p309.

engineering. Inspector Bucket is a social odd-job man, keeping things going on behalf of the society represented by Sir Leicester Dedlock, a 'practical' man who acts according to the sort of rule of thumb that enables him to see through Skimpole. (*BH* ch57 p832) As such, he chooses respectability rather than affection as the motive that Liz should encourage in her child. But it is not their respectability that makes the Plornishes keep faith with Old Nandy, but their affectionate hearts, their incoherent generosity of spirit. (*LD* I 31 pp414ff)

Respectable characters

> Of good or fair social standing, and having the moral qualities regarded as naturally appropriate to this. Hence, in later use, honest and decent in character or conduct, without reference to social position or in spite of being in humble circumstances.
> (*OED* sv *respectable* 4a)

This is clear enough in principle, but hard to apply. The older usage, with its double criterion combining social standing with moral qualities, falls apart as soon as we begin to doubt the connection between the two. How far lacking in moral qualities must a man of good social standing be before he ceases to be respectable? With the advent of the 'later use' (already well established by Dickens's time) there is the possibility of blatant equivocation – a man might establish his respectability in the older sense, without reference to any independently identifiable moral qualities, and so come to be accepted as respectable in the later, stronger sense, with its clear implication of honesty and decency. Since the word is also used to describe a person's appearance, manner or dress, it becomes impossible to distinguish between respectability and its appearance. *Respectable* thus becomes a key middle term for anyone wanting to establish his honesty on the basis of external appearance. It is not surprising that Dickens, with his sharp eye for humbug, is hostile to the whole idea, and seldom refers to it without irony.

The heavy repetition of an epithet is a sign that it is being used ironically, as when Rogue Riderhood is repeatedly described as honest, or the incompetent and slothful beadle in *Bleak House* is referred to as the 'active and intelligent'. Riderhood is clearly not honest, and the beadle is clearly not active or intelligent, so

that the ironical use of these epithets serves only to add a comic highlight to something we know already. Dickens uses *respectable* in this way in *Oliver Twist*, where the heading to chapter 39 refers to Fagin and Sykes as 'some respectable characters', following up a motif started when the Dodger first introduces Fagin to Oliver as a "spectable old genelman'. (*OT* ch8 p102)[4] There is more bite in the irony with which Dickens applies the epithet *merry* to Fagin. (*OT* ch8 p106) Whereas we are in no danger of supposing Fagin to be respectable, we do, from time to time, find ourselves falling into the trap of thinking of him as an attractive, even loveable, rogue.

Steerforth's respectable valet Littimer, 'the respectable creature' and 'the respectable phenomenon' (*DC* ch21 p359; ch28 p476), is not exposed as a villain until later. This suggests that Dickens might be doing something more complex, using the ironical repetition less in order to remind us that Littimer is not respectable than to cast doubt upon the idea of respectability itself. What one would like Dickens to be saying about Littimer is not so much that he *appears* respectable but isn't, as that he *is* respectable and yet commits appalling deeds. Given the ambiguities in the term, this might seem a trivial distinction, but the point is that in the latter case Littimer would stand as an indictment of respectable society, a sign that at the heart of respectability lies a capacity for evil. It is unclear whether Dickens means to go this far. Right from the outset we are prepared for the revelation that Littimer's respectability is a sham – he is '*in appearance* a pattern of respectability', and 'the most respectable-*looking*' man (*DC* ch21 p356 – my italics), so that the revelation at the end that he is a common thief and not respectable at all comes as no surprise.

Dickens has the same problem with Littimer as he has earlier with Squeers. He wants to get him into prison, but his real wrongdoing, his part in the seduction of Emily, is not a criminal offence. Accordingly, Dickens arranges, somewhat

4 Probably the most interesting use of the word *respectable* in *Oliver Twist* is not ironical but a piece of straightforward social observation – the fact that Nancy carries a basket and a door-key as (deceptive) emblems of respectability. (*OT* ch13 p139)

arbitrarily, for him to commit a separate, irrelevant financial crime, which brings him within reach of the law. That a common thief should help to seduce a girl, tells us nothing, but that a respectable man is capable of such wickedness, tells us something shocking about respectable society. Not by any stretch of the word, can a man be respectable who is a thief and is taken in ridiculous circumstances wearing a flaxen wig, and so respectable society can disown Littimer altogether. (*DC* ch61 p930) But in the end respectable society turns out to be reluctant to disown Littimer. Having accepted Creakle the sadist as a magistrate, it is willing to welcome Littimer as Creakle's pet prisoner, recalling what we were told on first encountering Littimer:

> If his nose had been upside-down, he would have made that respectable. He surrounded himself with an atmosphere of respectability and walked secure in it.
> (*DC* ch21 p356)

Vholes

Mr Vholes in *Bleak House* is genuinely respectable.

> Mr Vholes is a very respectable man. He has not a large business, but he is a very respectable man.[5] He is allowed by the greater attorneys who have made good fortunes, or are making them, to be a most respectable man. He never misses a chance in his practice; which is a mark of respectability. He never takes any pleasure; which is another mark of respectability. He is reserved and serious; which is another mark of respectability. His digestion is impaired, which is highly respectable. And he is making hay of the grass which is flesh, for his three daughters. And his father is dependent on him in the Vale of Taunton.
> (*BH* ch39 p603)

The three daughters and the father in the Vale of Taunton are Vholes's catchphrase, like Rogue Riderhood's 'sweat of my brow' (*OMF* III 8 p572), but whereas the marks of Riderhood's honesty are deceptive, because he is not honest and does not earn his living by the sweat of his brow, the marks of Vholes's respectability are genuine enough – at least, they are only phoney insofar as respectability itself is phoney. The father in the Vale of Taunton recalls Bucket's promise to Liz that a respectable son will be a comfort to her, but we never learn exactly what Vholes

5 Interestingly, this sounds very much like what Pip says about the business of Clarriker and Pocket: 'We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name.' (GE ch58 p489). Modesty in business is a standard Dickensian virtue, but here he picks on and explores its darker side.

does for his father. All we know is that his father, or the idea of his father, is something of a comfort to Vholes. Uriah Heep and Guppy, both of whom are on the way to setting themselves up as Vholeses, both have mothers to whom they are a comfort. Dickens even emphasises the affection that exists between Uriah and his mother, offering it not as an extenuation of their villainy but as a curiosity, like the first observation of Uriah breathing into the pony's nostrils. (*DC* ch52 p824; ch15 p275)

The characteristics which make his fellow-lawyers regard Vholes as respectable recall Mr Perker's questionable admiration of the professional skills of Dodson and Fogg. (*PP* ch34 p556). For his clients, Vholes adds a parade of assiduity and openness – he says to Mr Jarndyce and Esther:

> ... My digestion is much impaired, and I am but a poor knife and fork at any time. If I was to partake of solid food at this period of the day, I don't know what the consequences might be. Everything having been openly carried on, sir, I will now with your permission take my leave. ... We whose ambition it is to be looked upon in the light of respectable practicioners, sir, can but put our shoulders to the wheel. ...
> (*BH* ch45 p673)

The antipathy between respectability and enjoyment of food recalls the effect of Littimer on Mr Micawber at David's party. (*DC* ch28 p475) On the other hand, another strand in the idea of respectability comes from the *seriousness* of the evangelicals, who were notoriously fond of the table – as we see in Chadband's conversion of nutriment into oil.[6] (*BH* ch19)

In the interview between attorney and client we see Vholes judging the precise level of dishonesty which is still compatible with respectability.

> You know ... that I never give hopes, sir. I told you from the first, Mr C, that I never give hopes. Particularly in a case like this, where the greater part of the costs comes out of the estate, I should not be considerate of my good name, if I gave hopes. It might seem as if costs were my object. Still, when you say there is no change for the better, I must, as a bare matter of fact, deny that.
> (*BH* ch39 p608)[7]

This is as nice a text-book account of how to be respectable as Fagin's lessons are of

---

6 See Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness* (London, 1976) p29.

7 Guppy practises the art of legal 'openness' even in his romantic dealings. (*BH* ch9 p174 & ch38 p599)

the art of picking pockets. Vholes's openness consists of not attempting to conceal the unconcealable, and so he makes a point of telling Esther that Richard's affairs are 'in a very bad way' just in advance of the final collapse of the case. Esther understands that this is his 'scrupulous way of saving himself and his respectability' but does not suggest that the manoeuvre is unsuccessful. (*BH* ch60 p878) Unlike his digestion, Mr Vholes's respectability is unimpaired and he remains, as Skimpole recognises, the exemplary respectable man. (*BH* ch37 p588) His dishonesty cannot be disowned by respectable society as Littimer's might be.

The passage quoted earlier from chapter 39 in which we hear the opinion of Vholes's professional colleagues evokes a vivid sense of the flux of the legal world. It does this not in what is perhaps the usual Dickensian way, by picking on a striking physical characteristic (like Stryver's shoulder in *A Tale of Two Cities*), but by means of an understated abstraction: 'the greater attorneys who have made good fortunes, or are making them'. The first part of this phrase suggests, perhaps, a static hierarchy, but the last four words, casually thrown in, bring the picture to life and remind us that the law is a machine that is always in motion, driven by men making their fortune. The passage goes on to allot to Vholes his own place within this machine. It is a closed circle: Vholes is necessary for Chancery, and Chancery is necessary for Vholes.

> 'Repeal this statute, my good sir?' says Mr Kenge ... 'Never, with my consent. Alter this law, sir, and what will be the effect of your rash proceeding on a class of practitioners very worthily represented, allow me to say to you, by the opposite attorney in the case, Mr Vholes? ...
>
> Take a few steps more in this direction, say they, and what is to become of Vholes's father? Is he to perish? And of Vholes's daughters? Are they to be shirtmakers, or governesses? ...
>
> In a word, Mr Vholes, with his three daughters and his father in the Vale of Taunton, is continually doing duty, like a piece of timber, to shore up some decayed foundation that has become a pitfall and a nuisance. And with a great many people in a great many instances, the question is never one of a change from Wrong to Right (which is quite an extraneous consideration) but is always one of injury or advantage to that eminently respectable legion, Vholes.
>
> (*BH* ch39 pp604f)

This recalls Mr Spenlow's defence of the abuses in Doctors' Commons as essential for maintaining the price of a bushel of wheat (*DC* ch26 p448), but whereas

Spenlow's argument depends on a glorious *non sequitur*, Kenge's performance is more pointed, and shows up the Chancery system as a closed self-serving vicious circle. The reference to shirtmakers and governesses suddenly widens the picture, and Vholes becomes the 'exemplary man' not only of the legal profession, but of a social system that requires that young ladies should be kept in idleness. It is the same widening of the picture that Dickens achieves in *Little Dorrit* when he brings in the Hampton Court pensioners to complement his account of the Circumlocution Office and the Tite Barnacles. By building him solidly into the social fabric, Dickens forces us to recognise that Vholes's life-chilling dishonesty is not the property of a single vicious individual, who can be put in prison, but of the whole of respectable society.

Podsnap and the Veneerings' dinner table

Podsnap too, in *Our Mutual Friend*, is offered as a representative man who gives his name to a particular brand of respectability, a curious blend of self-assertiveness and conformism.

> Mr Podsnap's notions of the Arts in their integrity might have been stated thus. Literature; large print, respectfully descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven ... Nothing else to be permitted to those same vagrants the Arts, on pain of excommunication. Nothing else To Be – anywhere!
>
> As a so eminently respectable man, Mr Podsnap was sensible of its being required of him to take Providence under his protection. Consequently he always knew exactly what Providence meant. Inferior and less respectable men might fall short of that mark, but Mr Podsnap was always up to it. And it was very remarkable (and must have been very comfortable) that what Providence meant, was invariably what Mr Podsnap meant.
>
> (*OMF* I 11 pp174f)

The sense of constriction in a little world, words like excommunication and Providence, the attack on the arts – all these reveal in Podsnap's respectability a polished up version of the gloomy religion of the Clennam house. Like Arthur's, Georgiana Podsnap's life 'had been, from her first appearance on this planet, altogether of a shady order'. (*OMF* I 11 p176) There are differences. The Podsnaps have somewhat subtler methods of repression than the dark closet in which Arthur

was regularly imprisoned. (*LD* I 3 p72) Her parents' 'awfulness', of which Georgiana complains to Mrs Lammle (*OMF* I 11 p186), lacks the sheer brutality of Mrs Clennam's treatment of Arthur and his mother. Above all, Arthur's surroundings are gloomy with the gloom of decay whereas there is nothing worn out about the Podsnap furniture:

> Miss Podsnap's early views of life being principally derived from the reflections of it in her father's boots, and in the walnut and rosewood tables of the dim drawing-rooms, and in their swarthy giants of looking-glasses, were of a sombre cast ...
>
> (*OMF* I 11 p176)

Mrs Clennam's life-denying religion is an anachronism, with no future, whereas the gloom of Podsnappery is loud and prosperous, like the Podsnap plate:

> Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, 'Here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce; – wouldn't you like to melt me down!'
>
> (*OMF* I 11 p177)

Some of Dickens's humbugs, such as Squeers, Pecksniff and Uriah Heep, bring punishment on themselves by some particular piece of wrong-doing. The punishment of others, like Casby, Bounderby and Pumblechook, is in a sense both morally and artistically arbitrary, being little more than an expression of revulsion on the part of the author, but it seems to get close to the felt truth about hypocrisy. We rejoice in their humiliation because Dickens not only makes us deplore their falsity on abstract moral grounds – he creates in us a personal animosity towards them as intense and disproportionate as Tony Weller's towards the red-nosed Stiggins:

> It was a beautiful and exhilarating sight to see the red-nosed man writhing in Mr Weller's grasp, and his whole frame quivering with anguish as kick followed kick in rapid succession; it was a still more exciting spectacle to behold Mr Weller, after a powerful struggle, immersing Mr Stiggins's head in a horse-trough full of water, and holding it there, until he was half suffocated.
>
> (*PP* ch52 p836)

Alone of all the great Dickensian hypocrites Podsnap escapes unhumiliated, unpunished. He comes close to disaster, almost losing his daughter to the conspiracy of Lammle and Fledgeby, but is saved by the intervention of Mrs Lammle and Twemlow. Disappointingly, we don't witness the scene in which

Twemlow draws his attention to the plot, and so we have no sense of his humiliation. The event does not bring him to his senses as Louisa's flight brings Mr Gradgrind to his. The only hint that Podsnap is not quite what he was comes in the scene at the end of the book where Twemlow has the courage to retort to his sneering attack on Eugene Wrayburn's marriage to Lizzie.

No doubt Podsnap's invulnerability reflects an acceptance on Dickens's part that we cannot rely on events, or on stage-coach drivers in top-boots, to bring our enemies down. Not every Casby has a Pancks waiting with his scissors, and not every Stiggins ends with his head in a horse-trough. But there is another reason why it is important that Podsnap remains unscathed. He occupies a position in *Our Mutual Friend* somewhat similar to that occupied by the Tite Barnacles in *Little Dorrit* and the Boodles and Coodles, or Conversation Kenge in *Bleak House*, figures who represent permanent features of British society which permit great abuses and great aberrations to occur and great swindlers to flourish.

Of the three dishonest dealers in *Our Mutual Friend*, Lammle, Veneering and Fledgeby, it is Fledgeby's business that Dickens describes most clearly, perhaps because he understands it better, or because he expects the novel-reader to be more familiar with it. What is interesting in the picture of Fledgeby, of course, is his use of Riah as his front-man. Jew and money-lender were, in polite fiction, all but interchangeable terms. Dickens reminds us that the Jewish or gentile face of usury is irrelevant compared with the deeply entrenched motives of greed and aggression which underlie it. The circumstances that bind Riah to his master are too personal and even idiosyncratic to be generalised into a coherent analysis of the ideas of the Jew as scapegoat. The social comment to be derived from their relationship is limited to a warning against supposing that the phenomena of money-lending and bill-discounting are something alien to our society.

Alfred Lammle's business activities are not specified in any great detail.

> He invests his property. He goes, in a condescending amateurish way, into the City, attends meetings of Directors, and has to do with traffic in Shares. As is well known

> to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters ... O mighty Shares! To set those blaring images so high, and to cause us smaller vermin, as under the influence of henbane or opium, to cry out, night and day, 'Relieve us of our money, scatter it for us, buy us and sell us, ruin us, only we beseech ye take rank among the powers of the earth, and fatten on us!'
>
> (*OMF* I 10 pp159f)

The description of Lammle here is quickly diverted into a generalised satire on the share-dealing mania. The 'condescending amateurish way' suggests that in Lammle we are to see another of Dickens's languid and feeble young men, too gentlemanly to achieve anything, but we quickly learn better. Lammle is aggressive, brutal, predatory. We are expected to respond to him with an almost Podsnappian disgust.

> ... it would have been hard for stronger female heads than Georgiana's to determine whether [the frequenters of Mr Lammle's room] were men of pleasure or men of business. Between the room and the men there were strong points of general resemblance. Both were too gaudy, too slangey, too odorous of cigars, and too much given to horseflesh; the latter characteristic being exemplified in the room by its decorations, and in the men by their conversation.
>
> (*OMF* II 4 pp312f)

Presumably the young person is exposed to a great many other nasty masculine topics along with the cigars and horses. Georgiana's innocence is neither angelic nor heroic. We sympathise with her, and fear for her in this corrupt atmosphere, not because we admire her or like her, but simply because she is young, ignorant and vulnerable.

The paragraph goes on to become more specific and suggestive, and we lose sight of Georgiana for the moment:

> High-stepping horses seemed necessary to all Mr Lammle's friends – as necessary as their transaction of business together in a gipsy way at untimely hours of the morning and evening, and in rushes and snatches. There were friends who seemed to be always coming and going across the Channel, on errands about the Bourse, and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three quarters and seven eighths. ... They were all feverish, boastful, and indefinably loose; and they all ate and drank a great deal; and made bets in eating and drinking. They all spoke of sums of money, and only mentioned the sums and left the money to be understood; as 'five and forty thousand Tom,' or 'Two hundred and twenty-two on every individual share in the lot Joe.' ... They were always in a hurry, and yet seemed to have nothing tangible to do; except a few of them (these, mostly asthmatic and thick-lipped) who were for ever demonstrating to the rest, with gold pencil-cases which they could hardly hold because of the big rings on their forefingers, how much money was to be made. Lastly, they all swore at their grooms, and the grooms were not quite as respectful or complete as other men's

> grooms; seeming somehow to fall short of the groom point as their masters fell short of the gentleman point.
>
> (*OMF* II 4 p313)

This is a characteristic Dickensian blend of sharp observation, using eye, nose and, especially ear, with vague snobbery and a hint of xenophobia. The occasional vagueness does not blunt the edge – we feel that Dickens has these people entirely within his grasp and he is playing with them. The phrase 'indefinably loose' in the middle suggests that he is going to let them go, drifting off into unspecific moralising, but then he comes back and hits them with the simple concrete fact that they 'ate and drank a great deal.' This makes us prick up our ears, ready for another series of sharp, impressionistic details – the easy familiarity with long, meaningless numbers, the clumsy, be-ringed forefingers – and (it must be added) the asthmatic voices and thick lips, which are surely intended to whisper, 'Jew, Greek, Levantine, foreigner,' in our Podsnappian ears.

Exactly how do Lammle and his friends fall 'short of the gentleman point'? As soon as we ask we think of the futile conversation between Pip and Herbert about brewers being gentlemen. (*GE* ch22 p203) But the question needs to be asked, since it is clear that not everything that Dickens attributes to Lammle and his friends constitutes an automatic disqualification from gentlemanliness. Herbert Pocket is an absolutely indisputable gentleman and yet he lounges about the City, and talks of his plans for making huge sums of money:

> I shall not rest satisfied with merely employing my capital in insuring ships. I shall buy up some good Life Assurance shares, and cut into the Direction. I shall also do a little in the mining way. None of these things will interfere with my chartering a few thousand tons on my own account. I think I shall trade ... to the East Indies, for silks, shawls, spices, dyes, drugs, and precious woods. It's an interesting trade. ... I think I shall trade also ... to the West Indies, for sugar, tobacco, and rum. Also to Ceylon, specially for elephants' tusks.
>
> (*GE* ch22 p207)

Elephants' tusks and precious woods sound more attractive and gentlemanly than 'Bourse and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three quarters and seven eighths', and Herbert probably does not wear a large ring on his forefinger, and is certainly incapable of swearing at a groom. If Dickens is challenged to say what is really objectionable about Lammle

and his friends, he can reply: Listen to the way they speak, watch how they hurry about with nothing tangible to do – the peculiar combination of activity and aimlessness that we saw in the Americans in *Martin Chuzzlewit* – watch and listen and you will see and hear that they are false. The novelist cannot tell us in every case how to distinguish true from false, but gives us practice in listening and looking and feeling.

Lammle's City activities are left in the background, and we concentrate first on his own fraudulent marriage and then on his attempt to sell Georgiana Podsnap to Fledgeby. Perhaps Dickens feels that, in the end, there is nothing very clearly wrong with the pursuit of money in the City, despite the accompaniment of cigars, horseflesh and swearing at grooms, and that we only move from mere nastiness into unambiguous wrong-doing when we allow the predatory morals of money-making to corrupt the innocent and to affect the central concerns of human life, love and marriage. Or perhaps he doesn't think that a circumstantial account of financial malpractice would make such a good story as the attempt to sell Georgiana.

Whatever the explanation, it's hard not to feel cheated. In a rhetorical passage quoted earlier Dickens accuses share-dealers of relieving us of our money and fattening on us, but there is nothing in his account of Lammle to give substance to the accusation. Insofar as they don't pay their household bills, the Lammles certainly fatten themselves at the expense of their tradesmen, but in doing that they are doing no more than the Rawdon Crawleys – in other words, Dickens fails to put his finger on the forms of financial dishonesty that belong to the particular society he is describing. He has caught the sound and smell of the City men, but when it comes to saying what is really wrong with what they do he falls back on traditional models of domestic extravagance and of the man who can't, or won't, pay his way.

Similar points can be made about Veneering.

> ... it is written in the Books of the Insolvent Fates that Veneering shall make a resounding crash next week. Yes. Having found out the clue to that great mystery

> how people can contrive to live beyond their means, and having overjobbed his jobberies as legislator deputed to the Universe by the pure electors of Pocket-Breaches, it shall come to pass that Veneering will accept the Chiltern Hundreds ...
>
> (*OMF* IV 17 p886)

In this last word on Veneering Dickens is concentrating on two things, on the downfall of the bran-new house that we saw at the beginning of the book, and on political corruption. These are interesting enough, of course, but something has been lost. Of the drug-house of Chicksey, Veneering and Stobbles we are told:

> Chicksey and Stobbles ... had both become absorbed in Veneering, once their traveller or commission agent: who had signalized his accession to supreme power by bringing into the business a quantity of plate-glass window and French-polished mahogany partition, and a gleaming and enormous door-plate.
>
> (*OMF* I 4 p76)

This is the essential Veneering. He is, it is said, a 'representative man' (*OMF* II 3 p295) and what he represents is, presumably, the new businessman, the financial adventurer, and so we are justified in wanting to know more about this aspect of him. It's not enough to reply that there's nothing to know, that Veneering is all surface with no substance – this is true in a sense, but Chicksey and Stobbles plainly didn't find him a nullity, he was substantial enough for them. The only deal we see him broker is not a business deal, but the marriage of the Lammles, where each partner, helped by Veneering, swindles the other; and the only enterprise we see him embark upon is his election campaign.

Dickens takes the financial adventurism for granted and concentrates instead on the way in which Veneering manages to install himself in the social and political élite through the misuse of two noble ideas, the home and friendship.

> Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, ... they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.
>
> For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings – the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle stickey.
>
> (*OMF* I 2 p48)

They have no domestic life. Their establishment exists solely for public display. In their one private moment Mr Veneering tells his wife of the offer of a seat in parliament and immediately throws himself into a hansom, while she relinquishes the baby to the nurse and orders out the carriage. (*OMF* II 3 p295) The baby exists only as part of their display, its night-time colic interpreted as 'the Fairies ... telling [her] that her papa would shortly be an M.P.' (*OMF* II 3 p305) This piece of sentiment is too much for Mrs Veneering and she faints, and her husband drags her from the room, 'with her feet impressively scraping the carpet', but it is impossible to imagine what he does with her once he gets her outside the door and is alone with her. When they hear that the Lammles have defaulted they cannot discuss it together, but must call a dinner-party. (*OMF* III 17 p683)

Linked with this travesty of the idea of home is their corruption of the idea of friendship. It is a standing joke throughout the book that everyone who comes to their house is their oldest friend, to the perpetual puzzlement of Twemlow. One moment Podsnap fails to recognise Veneering, the next moment Twemlow sees them 'linked together as twin brothers in the back drawing-room near the conservatory door', and learns that Podsnap is to be the baby's godfather. (*OMF* I 2 p51) Friendship dissolves as quickly as it arises. As soon as the Lammles are sold up, Veneering discovers that they are 'the only people ever entered on his soul's register who are *not* the oldest and dearest friends he has in the world'. (*OMF* III 17 p683) This denial is, of course, to be repeated when he himself is bankrupt, at which point 'Society will discover that it always did despise Veneering'. (*OMF* IV 17 p887)

There is nothing very startling in this representation of the fickleness of worldly friendships. What is interesting is the role played by these so-called friendships in validating Veneering as a member of the élite. When he stands for parliament, his friends 'rally round' and 'bring him in'. Just as he sponsored Lammle and so gave credibility to the stories of Lammle's wealth –

> Veneering launching himself upon [Sophronia Lammle's trustee] as his oldest friend (which makes seven, Twemlow thought), and confidentially retiring with him into the conservatory, it is understood that Veneering is his co-trustee, and that they are arranging about the fortune. Buffers are even overheard to whisper Thir-ty Thou-sand Pou-nds! with a smack and a relish suggestive of the very finest oysters.
>
> (*OMF* I 10 p166)

– so his own pretensions are supported by Podsnap's friendship.

Unlike Veneering and Lammle, Podsnap is genuinely well to do: 'Beginning with a good inheritance, he had married a good inheritance.' (*OMF* I 11 p174) He is, so far as we can tell, an honest man. Veneering and Lammle end up as outlaws, Society eventually disowns them, but it can't disown Podsnap. Uninterested as Dickens is in the details of their activities, he doesn't place Lammle and Veneering very precisely within the economic system. If his attack on the money-making society were limited to exposing their particular frauds, it would fail – we could regard the dishonesty of Lammle and Veneering as every bit as accidental as the benevolence of the Cheerybles. But instead of their economic activity he concentrates on the falseness of their lives, and on Podsnap's collusion.

The frauds succeed because the respectable need to believe in them. To be close to 'Thir-ty Thou-sand Pou-nds' satisfies a craving of the Buffers.[8] It is a psychological imperative for Podsnap that nothing and no-one must cause his view of the world to be questioned:

> It was a trait in Mr Podsnap's character (and in one form or other it will be generally seen to pervade the depths and shallows of Podsnappery), that he could not endure a hint of disparagement of any friend or acquaintance of his. 'How dare you?' he would seem to say, in such a case. 'What do you mean? I have licensed this person. This person has taken out *my* certificate. Through this person you strike at me, Podsnap the Great. And it is not that I particularly care for the person's dignity, but that I do most particularly care for Podsnap's.' Hence, if anyone in his presence had presumed to doubt the responsibility of the Lammles, he would have been mightily huffed. Not that any one did, for Veneering, M.P., was always the authority for their being very rich, and perhaps believed it. As indeed he might, if he chose, for anything he knew of the matter.
>
> (*OMF* II 4 p307)

---

8 'It was said by the wise and witty Sydney Smith, that many Englishmen appear to have a remarkable satisfaction in even speaking of large sums of money; and that when men of this stamp say of Mr So-and-So, "I am told he is worth Two HUN-dred THOU-sand POUNDS," there is a relish in their emphasis, an unctuous appetite and zest in their open-mouthed enunciation, which nothing but the one inspiring theme, Money, develops in them.' ('A slight depreciation of the currency', *MP* p56)

This passage unites a number of different elements which conspire together to give credibility to the Lammles – the aggressive insistence of the respectable world that whoever *seems* respectable must *be* respectable; the self-validating effect of a reputation for being rich; and the power of one successful lie to endorse another.

Respectable men and bubbles of finance

Although Dickens largely avoids referring to Veneering's business affairs, the atmosphere of the election campaign for Pocket-Breaches, and of the Veneering dinner parties, is highly suggestive of the sort of feverish financial dealing which was typical of the 1860s. While *Our Mutual Friend* was appearing in monthly instalments, Dickens was publishing in *All the Year Round* a remarkable series of articles on City fraud by M.R.L. Meason.[9] Meason takes on a succession of personae, usually a naïve figure who has wandered into the maze of finance: a victim in 'Wanted to borrow, One Hundred Pounds' and 'How I discounted my Bill', or a willing apprentice in fraud in 'How we Floated the bank' and its sequels. Taken together, these articles constitute an impressive dossier, providing a commentary on the Veneerings and their circle.

The premises of the Grand Financial and Credit Bank of Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Australia (Limited) recall those of Chicksey and Stobbles after they were taken over by Veneering:

> Nothing could be smarter than our desks, counters, brass-rails, and new ledgers. ... The very sight of our piles of new cheque-books – numbered, lettered, and stamped – or of our heaps of new calf-bound pass-books, ought to have given even a South Sea Islander an uncontrollable desire to open a current account, had he come into our office.
>
> ('How the Bank came to Grief', *AYR*, 25 February 1865 p102)

The process of gathering directors for the bank –

---

9 Meason's articles were reprinted in a book, *Bubbles of Finance* by 'A City Man', in 1865. These and other articles on the same theme are discussed in Wilfred P. Dvorak 'Dickens's Ambivalence as Social Critic in the 1860s: Attitudes to Money in *All the Year Round* and *The Uncommercial Traveller*' (*Dickensian* 1984, vol 80 pp89-104). Dvorak's view is that Meason (and by implication Dickens) was not concerned to attack an 'evil force called money' but to expose 'the irresponsible and immoral manipulation of [the financial] system by various individuals'. (p90)

> ... I rushed out of Mr May's office, called the first Hansom I saw, and was quickly bowling away towards the West-end, where my uncle resided. ...
>
> At last, after about a month's hard work, and rushing about in Hansom cabs, we got together the names of eight gentlemen ...
>
> ('How We "floated" the Bank', *AYR*, 31 December 1864 p494)

– recalls the 'taking cabs, and "going about"' by which Veneering gets his friends to 'rally round':

> Many vast vague reputations have been made, solely by taking cabs and going about. This particularly obtains in all Parliamentary affairs. Whether the business in hand be to get a man in, or get a man out, or get a man over, or promote a railway, or jockey a railway, or what else, nothing is understood to be so effectual as scouring nowhere in a violent hurry – in short, as taking cabs and going about.
>
> (*OMF* II 3 p301)

Dickens's point here is slightly different from Meason's, of course. Meason is interested in the reasons for going off to different parts of London, the importance of bringing in the West End to lend glamour to the board, whereas Dickens suggests that the mere act of rushing about acts like a charm to make 'vast vague reputations'. In other words, violent activity, irrespective of any rational goal, satisfies a psychological need of the man of affairs. Dickens has grasped imaginatively and expressed boldly a truth which eludes Meason's more analytical account.[10] In other respects the lack of technical detail in Dickens's portrayal might seem to weaken it. For example, we are told at the end that Veneering 'like a good husband' has invested 'from time to time ... considerable sums' in diamonds, on which he and Mrs Veneering will live during their retirement in Calais. (*OMF* IV 17 p887) Here Dickens is relying upon a vague and literary model of financial misdealing, and the 'like a good husband' though plainly ironical, lacks particularity. In contrast, Meason, in the three articles on 'Going into Business', gives a circumstantial account of how the directors of the bill-passing business regularly extract money from the company in order to prevent it from building up assets to meet its liabilities – in other words, buying diamonds is not, as it seems to

---

[10] Dickens's own hyperactivity, as his vigour declined, is explained simply by Forster as due his pressing family commitments and the need to 'make the most money in the shortest time' (*Life of Charles Dickens* VIII 7 vol 2 p250), but perhaps this is at least partly a rationalisation of a psychological compulsion.

be in Veneering's case, a matter of prudently, perhaps dishonestly, guarding against misfortune, but is an essential part of the fraud.

Through all Meason's articles the idea of respectability runs as a refrain.[11] The promoter of the phoney insurance company in 'Insurance and Assurance' combines the aristocratic credentials of a Twemlow with Podsnap's status as a family man, with also a touch of Mr Vholes:

> The Honourable John Fenceman was the younger brother of a late, and the uncle of an actual peer. ... In his manners he was gentlemanly, affable, and he never by any chance pushed into notice his noble birth, nor the handle he had to his name. He did not affect the manners of a young man, had a family of grown daughters, and a home in one of the best second-rate Tyburnian squares, dressed as became a paterfamilias, was a sound Conservative, and exceeding loud Protestant, and altogether embodied the English definition of 'a most respectable man.'
>
> ('Insurance and Assurance', *AYR*, 3 June 1865 p438)

The affable absence of pride of the Honourable John is not a Podsnap characteristic – there is a naked aggressiveness about the money-makers in *Our Mutual Friend* – but there are villains elsewhere who combine extreme graspingness with conspicuous affability, like Casby, Chester or Carker, whose personal emblem, his teeth, suggests both smile and bite.

The sense of subtle distinctions within the ranks of respectability suggested by the phrase, 'one of the best second-rate Tyburnian squares,' is developed in a later article where the narrator is talking about forming the board for his Bank of Patagonia:

> It is true that we were not able to get either very first-class men, nor perhaps the best of the second-class City men. But of second-rate second-class, and first-rate third-class names, we had as many as we liked ...
>
> ('The Bank of Patagonia (Limited)', *AYR*, 17 June 1865 p487)

Podsnap must be a second-rate, second-class name, and he is conscious of a difference between himself and Veneering, the 'mushroom man'. (*OMF* I 10 p177)

---

11 Attacks on respectability were common in novels of the period. The serialised novel appearing in *All the Year Round* at the same time as Meason's articles (*Half a Million of Money* by Amelia B Edwards) contains passages of heavy irony directed against the respectability of the villain's clerk, Abel Keckwitch – passages which are by no means essential to the plot and which don't really help to place Keckwitch or explain his motives. (See, for example, *Half a Million of Money* ch23 'A thoroughly respectable man', *AYR*, July 1, 1865)

In 'Promoters of Companies' we are told of '"four good City-men", who were willing to join the company as directors, provided the rest of the board was composed of respectable men.'[12] The best advice that a 'careful financier, a long-headed financier' can give to a friend who is a newcomer to the field, is not to get mixed up with 'any schemes which were untried, or of which the directors were not of acknowledged respectability'.[13] Here we have again the same ambiguity that is to be found in the dictionary definition of respectability. Logically the two conditions are quite separate, but they go together so easily that one feels that for the financier and his friend they form a single, composite and treacherous idea. And yet a recurrent theme of Meason's articles is to show how notoriously easy it is to gather a respectable board of directors to preside over entirely untried schemes.

In 'How We "floated" the Bank' Meason describes some of the dodges for making up a respectable board of directors. One is to exploit a man's desire to help a son or nephew – the narrator's uncle joins the board of the bank merely in order to procure the secretaryship for his nephew, and brings a friend, and a friend's friend with him: 'thus a respectable nucleus of the board was formed'. Another way is more straightforward bribery, 'making them, as it were, a present of four hundred pounds each, in shares'.[14]

The board which these inducements gather together includes two retired army officers, a retired China merchant, a retired Indian civil servant, and three gentlemen who can point to important sounding business interests, a list of names whose general appearance so pleases the promoter that 'he never seemed tired of contemplating the paper'.[15] The military men were, it seems, of particular importance, because of the tendency of other military men to trust them. One thinks of Colonel Newcome. When the bank is wound up, among the ruined shareholders is an old soldier, of whom the narrator writes:

---

12 'Promoters of Companies', *AYR*, 12 March 1864 p113.
13 'Insurance and Assurance' p438.
14 'How We "Floated" the Bank' pp494 & 495.
15 'How We "Floated" the Bank' p495.

> The silent despair of this veteran was enough to make the heart of any save a promoter of companies bleed. It is true that, strictly speaking, men like him have no more right to speculate than a child has to play with razors, but he had seen the names of men he knew and respected – men who had themselves been deceived – amongst the directors, and, thinking the concern must be a sound one, had invested his all ...
>
> ('How the Bank was Wound up', *AYR*, 15 April 1865 p278)

Another respectable board of a fraudulent company is described in these terms:

> Of the seven new directors, one was a baronet – a poor man, without an acre or a hundred pounds he could call his own, but still a baronet; and with untoadying John Bull, even this much of a title goes a long way. Another was a member of parliament, and when I have said that, I have said everything; for beyond his top-coat, scarf-pin, watch and chain, umbrella and hat he had no property, portable or otherwise, that I or anybody else could discover. Next in the list followed two medical men, both of whom were individuals of more leisure than money, and more assurance than learning. The fifth was a retired brewer, who, having for thirty years worked hard to make a fortune, now worked as hard to spend it. Every man has his particular hobby, and this individual's mania was that of being in company with men who had handles to their names, or were, as he termed them, 'real gentlemen, and no mistake, sir.'
>
> ('Insurance and Assurance' p439)

This account echoes observations that will be familiar to Dickens's readers: the way the new City men have picked up the worst aspects of the older social system, the toadyism and Meagles-like respect for titles; the worthless member of parliament; the two renegade doctors, reminiscent of Skimpole. The explicit reference to the Dickensian term 'portable property' suggests that Meason is here conscious of walking in territory that has been mapped out by Dickens, the 'highly respected "Conductor" of this vehicle'.[16]

Another way in which the City parodies the old code of gentlemanly dealing is in the matter of taking a gentleman's word. Amongst the City men who people Meason's articles this has become collusion in falsehood.

> I knew that Mr May had secured no other directors, and he knew that I knew he was stating what was not true; nevertheless he repeated it again and again to different persons until he really seemed to believe his own falsehood.
>
> ('How we "Floated" the Bank' p494)

Nor is it only other people that these men seek to deceive. There is amongst them a conspiracy to defraud each other:

> I ventured to hint that, in qualifying for shares, the amount ought to be at once paid down in cash, but was overruled by nearly the whole board declaring that there was

16 'Going into Business', *AYR*, 20 May 1864 p404.

> plenty of time, and that it would 'all be right,' and so on. ... In vain I ventured to expostulate, and to say that, however solvent the giver of a note of hand might be, promises to pay were not cash and ought not to be considered cash. But I was overruled, as it was declared that, where all were honourable men, and quite certain to meet their engagements, it would only be creating difficulties did we make any distinction between money and engagements.
>
> ('Insurance and Assurance' p439)

The stock-in-trade of the City man, paper money, accounts, figures, money in the abstract, lends itself to deception.

> Mr Velardi ... gave, as references of the respectability of our house, our London banker, as well as the banker in Odessa with whom we did business. To have a good answer given by any banker to whom you refer, it is necessary to have a good balance in his hands; for this reason my partner wished that in each of his banker's hands there should be at least five thousand pounds.
>
> ('Going into Business', *AYR*, 13 May 1865 p381)

Their house in fact has no money at all, but by having their Smyrna branch draw bills on their London branch they are able to raise the ten thousand pounds to put into their bank accounts for long enough to get the references. Even men who are exploiting the illusion of wealth to swindle others, can themselves be fooled by the same trick:

> Our cashier saw that although large amounts were paid out of this account, a good deal was paid into the credit of the customer, and therefore believed him to be in a large way of business. ... One day ... late in the afternoon he paid in a crossed cheque for five hundred pounds ... [and we] could not know until next day whether the cheque would be paid. In the mean time – believing that it would be duly paid – our ledger-keeper had passed the cheque to the credit of our customer, which was just what the latter had calculated upon. Some hours before we could know whether the cheque would be paid or not, an open cheque for four hundred and fifty pounds from our client was presented and paid over our counter, and from that day to this our highly respectable client has ever been heard of.
>
> ('How the Bank Came to Grief', *AYR*, 25 February 1865 p102)

There are undoubtedly some remarkable rogues in Meason's little stories, but the crucial point is that respectable men let them, for the most part, get away with their roguery. This collusion is explained in a number of ways. There is the intrinsic deceptiveness of the material they are dealing with, and the charm-like effect of large figures. Then there is the fact that many of the amateur directors, well-meaning though they might be, are either too lazy, or too ignorant and inexperienced, to keep control – they think that 'by showing themselves from time

to time in the board-room, they would perform all the duty required of them'.[17] The one case in which the perpetrators of the fraud are really brought low is the Insurance fraud, where one of the directors (the brewer with the taste for titles) turns out to be 'a capital man of business, as well as a most sensible, kind-hearted fellow'.[18] There is an article a few years earlier than Meason's series, in which John Hollingshead attacks the incompetence and irresponsibility of the auditor – 'a half-human, half-mechanical being' which

> ... had an almost superstitious reverence for figures, if they appeared to balance each other, and showed no marks of erasure; and ... so long as these emblems or signs of things were provided in liberal quantities, it never cared to enquire whether the things themselves had any substantial existence.
>
> ('Convict Capitalists', *AYR*, 9 June 1860 p202)

Another factor in a successful fraud is the assurance of the perpetrators: 'be bumptious, talk big,' is the advice given to the newcomer to the company promotion business, 'as if you could bring Rothschild, Baring and Peabody as directors of any company that you are connected with'.[19] Hollingshead notes the success of a similar ploy, when he describes an embezzling clerk who, when challenged, 'was allowed to take a lofty tone about his means and position "as a gentleman"' and who thereby kept his position and carried on with his embezzling activities for a further two-and-a-half years.[20] The importance of a confident bearing is emphasised in an unattributed article written as though by a money-lender's tout:

> I dress well – no man better – I have always remained a member of a military club, and it is generally supposed by the numerous men about town who know me that I have property of my own, and live rather a fast life in London ... 'seems always to have coin; meet him everywhere; capital fellow; up to anything.'
>
> ('Accommodation', *AYR*, 8 April 1865 p260)

Despite knowing these tricks himself, the tout is himself deceived by another practitioner.

---

17 'How the Bank came to Grief' p104.

18 'Insurance and Assurance' p442.

19 'How we "floated" the Bank' p493.

20 'Very Singular Things in the City', *AYR*, 14 July 1860 p325.

The fundamental reason why the respectable collude with the rogues is that it is often in everyone's interest to keep things quiet and keep up the pretence. In 'Promoters of Companies' Meason insists that the shareholders of the phoney company must have known, from their own commonsense, that the quoted premium was a 'sham', but so long as the pretence was successful they found it profitable.[21] When the bill-passing concern is finally brought to a state of collapse, the major creditors allow the partners to survive in business, by compounding and making arrangements 'satisfactory, it is to be hoped, to all parties concerned', so that the bankrupt partners can resume their business as though nothing had happened:

> ... no sooner did we get our heads a little above water, than some of those who had been our bitterest enemies and most vehement denouncers, began by degrees to cultivate a sort of business-like friendship for us.

– and eventually they are re-established:

> In every sense of the word we are most respectable men, and we shall continue to be most respectable men, unless another commercial crisis takes place, when we shall find it rather difficult not to stop payment; for, at a rough calculation, I take our liabilities to be about one thousand times greater than our assets could ever become.
> ('Going into Business' *AYR*, 27 May 1865pp431f)

It's a club, this world of respectable men that Meason describes. The conditions for membership are a balance at the bank (no matter how it is raised) and a gentlemanly bearing (no matter where or how it is acquired). It has long been a commonplace of polite fiction that the very rich can get away without being altogether gentlemen – what Meason's little sketches demonstrate is that a sufficiently gentlemanly bearing, whether of the assertive or of the affable variety, will go a long way towards making good a deficiency at the bank. The real miracles, of course, are Merdle and Veneering, who are neither gentlemanly in their manners nor possessed of real money in the bank. Their rise is a measure of how far society has lost its way. The club's membership committee, which Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* characterises as Society with a capital S, has got so used to

21 'Promoters of Companies' p115.

prevarication and evasion and a systematic turning of a blind eye, that every so often a Merdle or Veneering slips past.

Conclusion

There is much to be said on the other side, in favour of respectability. We have seen ideas of respectability and gentlemanliness misused by the City fraudsters, but they are ideas which are also strongly associated with social improvement.[22] Veneering and Merdle, like Meason's rogues, represent occasions when respectability spectacularly fails in its function as hallmark, but we must assume that it does not invariably fail. There has to be an honest trade in bills, or no-one would take the fraudulent bills. Even though the rottenness is endemic, and society is systematically preyed upon by the respectable class of lawyers, stockbrokers, fashionable artists, leisured gentlemen, retired officers and the rest; even though respectability by its nature lends a cloak to wrong-doing of the Merdle sort, nonetheless there are those within the system who behave honestly and honourably enough: Doyce and Clennam, Clarriker and Pocket. We might feel that when Bagehot writes of James Wilson, founder of *The Economist*, in these terms –

> ... Mr Wilson's temperament was very active and his mind was very fertile. And though in many parts of business these gifts are very advantageous, in many also they are very dangerous, if not absolutely disadvantageous. Frequently they are temptations. Capital is always limited; often it is *very* limited; and therefore a man of business, who is managing his own capital, has only defined resources, and can engage only in a certain number of undertakings. But a person of active temperament and fertile mind will soon chafe at that restriction. His inventiveness will show him many ways in which money might easily be made, and he cannot but feel that with his energies he would like to make it. If he have besides a sanguine temperament, he will believe that he can make it. The records of unfortunate commerce abound in instances of men who have been unsuccessful because they had great mind, great energy, and great hope, but had not money in proportion.
>
> ('Memoir of the Right Hon James Wilson' *The Economist* 17 November 1860 *Literary Studies* vol1 p345)

– there are echoes of the cooing of respectable society over Merdle's greatness, but it seems that Wilson was by any standards an honest man, who, having failed in the indigo trade in the 1830s, paid his creditors more than was legally required.[23]

---

22 The part they played in soothing social differences and promoting social cohesion is discussed by Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period* (London, 1993) Introduction p21 & ch4 167f, and Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London, 1979) ch4 p279.

23 'Memoir of the Right Hon James Wilson' p343.

Respectability works, bills circulate, because there are Wilsons as well as Merdles – and more still who are neither Wilsons nor Merdles, but ordinary, law-abiding men who 'were not in a grand way of business, but had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well'. (*GE* ch59 p489)

But it is hard not to feel, reading the novels of the 1850s and more especially the 1860s, that there was more to the passion for respectability than just the need to keep bills circulating. The rogue in Samuel Smiles's anecdote[24] declares that he would give £1000 for a good man's name because he could make £10,000 out of it, but the motive behind Podsnap's respectability goes deeper than that. The flush on his face as he manifests his prejudices argues a commitment to his creed that is more than just a matter of business. When it comes to women's respectability we see Dickens less willing to be ironical, more inclined to treat it seriously, as though for women the alternative to respectability is too awful to contemplate. Women, like the poor, can so easily fall into the mire of unrespectability.[25] But what of Podsnap? What accounts for the intensity of the bourgeois male's need for respectability?

E J Hobsbawm in *The Age of Capital 1848-1875* describes the need felt by the bourgeois to confirm and justify his superiority. This need gives rise to myths, such as the myth of the external agitator, used to explain any failure on the part of the lower orders to acknowledge the masters' right to dominate; or the myth of genetic superiority, used to justify a superiority which is hard to justify on other grounds.

> Since success was due to personal merit, failure was clearly due to personal lack of merit. The traditional bourgeois ethic, puritan or secular, had ascribed this to moral or spiritual feebleness rather than to lack of intellect, for it was evident that not much in the way of brains was needed for success in business, and conversely that mere brains did not guarantee wealth and still less 'sound' views. ...
>
> But a simple classification into the morally superior and inferior, though adequate to distinguish the 'respectable' from the drunken and licentious labouring mass, was plainly no longer adequate, except for the striving lower middle class, if only

24 *Self Help* ch13 p386.

25 Geoffrey Best, in *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (pp285f), refers to Mrs Catherick in Collins's *Woman in White* as an example both of how respectability can be acquired, and of the passionate need for respectability felt by a woman who is on her own in the world and who has a questionable past.

> because the ancient virtues were no longer visibly applicable to the successful and wealthy bourgeoisie. The ethic of abstinence and effort could hardly be applied to the success of the American millionaires of the 1860s and 1870s, or even to the wealthy manufacturer, retired to a life of country-house leisure, still less to his *rentier* relatives; to those whose ideal was, in Ruskin's words: 'that [life] should be passed in a *pleasant undulating world* with iron and coal everywhere beneath it ...'
>
> (E J Hobsbawm: *The Age of Capital 1848-1875* ch13 pp246f
> the reference to Ruskin is to *The Crown of Wild Olives* in *Works* vol 18 p453)

For the needs of the bourgeois the negative sense of respectability, meaning merely *not drunken and licentious*, is inadequate. For Vholes respectability requires a scrupulous abstinence from obvious dishonesty; for Podsnap it is something more aggressive, as he takes what Hobsbawm calls the short step 'from master to master-race'.[26]

This ideology is underpinned by a series of equivocal middle terms such as *successful, gentleman* and *respectable* . We have seen the dishonest dealer play on the ambiguity: 'I have a balance at the bank so I am respectable; as I am respectable, I must be honest.' We have seen that, given impressive enough trappings, even the balance at the bank can be dispensed with. The greatest trick, however, as Pip reminds us, is to deceive not others, but ourselves:

> An obliging stranger, under pretence of compactly folding up my bank-notes for security's sake, abstracts the notes and gives me nutshells; but what is his sleight of hand to mine, when I fold up my own nutshells and pass them on to myself as notes!
>
> (*GE* ch28 p247).

26 *The Age of Capital 1848-1875* (London 1975) p248.

Chapter 10: Mercenary and other marriages

In great courtship novels such as *Waverley* and *Tom Jones* the plot is a colourful pilgrimage whose goal is marriage, with an accompanying settlement of property. After their extraordinary and perilous adventures, Edward Waverley and Tom Jones settle down with their Rose and Sophia and take their place in the orderly succession of the generations. For the Victorians it is harder to see marriage and property as the impregnable twin supports of a stable social order. Thackeray represents the dynastic marriage as a fierce god to whom virgins are sacrificed by their families. It is less easy to say where Trollope stands, partly because his characters are generally cushioned by their unreflective good nature and the proximity of money; partly because he returns to the theme repeatedly, and each time manages to strike a new balance between money and romance.

Dickens is fascinated by marriage, and marries people off unmercifully, far beyond what is needed for his plots, and almost always to the accompaniment of the chink of money. The Bunsby-MacStinger marriage, perhaps the least necessary of all, is marked by the transfer of Bunsby's 'stupendous watch and appendages' to his bride, and the distribution of halfpence to her children. (*D&S* ch60 pp950ff) Pip's first thought about Wemmick's Miss Skiffins is that he judges her 'to stand possessed of portable property', and at the wedding breakfast Wemmick encourages his guests to eat well, because the meal has been ordered at a fixed price. (*GE* ch37 p313; ch55 p464) Money is seldom far from anything we do.

Paul Dombey's christening is held up by a wedding in the church:

> The very wedding looked dismal as they passed in front of the altar. The bride was too old and the bridegroom too young, and a superannuated beau with one eye and an eyeglass stuck in its blank companion, was giving away the lady, while the friends were shivering.
>
> (*D&S* ch5 p114)

Dickens knows that his readers will assume that there is something wrong about an old bride with a young groom. The superannuated beau with one eye rules out any

more cheerful view. We are not expected to think too much about what is hardly more than an incidental emblem of the unfurnished quality of Paul's life, but if we do think about it we see that there are several different ways in which this marriage might be wrong. Has a frustrated and scheming woman taken advantage of the ludicrous susceptibility of a foolish adolescent? Or has a precociously prudent young man carried off a susceptible spinster with a comfortable fortune? Or is it that a mismatched couple are being forced into marriage by family pressure?

The male adventurer

The crudest form of the mercenary marriage is when a man hunts down a widow, a mature spinster or young heiress. The penniless matrimonial adventurer, like Sir Ulic Mackilligut in *Humphry Clinker* is a familiar eighteenth century literary figure of fun. Treating the subject more as a scandal than as a cause for amusement, Fanny Trollope (*The Vicar of Wrexhill*, 1839) and Mary Braddon (*Vixen*, 1879) both depict unprotected widows (that is, widows unprotected by restrictive clauses in their husbands' wills) married and destroyed by calculating men who are after their money. This figure is represented in Dickens by the attractive rogue Alfred Jingle, and the horrible Fledgeby. We are more inclined to forgive Jingle, because he makes us laugh, and his victim is middle-aged, and so conventionally ridiculous like Mackilligut's Tabby Bramble. Most of Dickens's predatory men, however, are not primarily interested in money. Jonas Chuzzlewit marries Mercy Pecksniff not for her money but to indulge his hatred of women, and Uriah Heep's designs on Agnes, and Gride's on Madeline Bray, might seem less disgusting if we felt they were purely mercenary.

Mark Tapley and Dick Swiveller are both tempted to secure their future in this way, but think better of it. Edward Chester's father wants him to run off with an heiress, but he high-mindedly refuses. Mark's case is complicated, because he does in the end marry his comfortable widow. He can do this only after he has, as he repeatedly puts it, 'come out strong' and proved himself to be 'jolly' under adverse

circumstances. (For example *MC* ch5 p121) He needs the experience in America to prove that he is something more than the husband of the widow Lupin. This sort of reasoning is another strand in our disapproval of the young bridegroom: he is abdicating the man's duty to be something and define his wife's status in terms of his own. Mrs Lupin takes Mark's name not just for herself but also for her Blue Dragon, which becomes The Jolly Tapley.

Dickens is prepared to accept that a bold woman like Fanny Dorrit might marry without love for the sake of position. Indeed he prefers the thought that Estella takes Drummle for economic reasons to any suspicion that she was in love with such a man. Mrs Mantalini is kept in subjection to her charmer by her vanity. (*NN* ch22 p336; ch44 p670) It is as though Dickens is seeking ways of evading a confrontation with the reality of sexual desire as an explanation of how women fall for unworthy men.[1] Murdstone and Gowan are bad husbands, but Dickens avoids the suggestion that they preyed upon their wives just for their money. Murdstone's grief at Clara's death is real enough to make us believe that he loved her in his way, although when we learn that he has repeated the exercise of marrying a 'young lady ... with a very good little property', we are bound to be sceptical. (*DC* ch9 p182; ch59 p905) Gowan is too lazy to be a thorough-going fortune hunter, and since Pet is entirely loveable we can well believe that he loves her. Clara and Pet, in mistaking the moral character of their lovers, have somehow failed, but their lovers' love for them, such as it is, excuses them. It is an excuse that Betsey Trotwood and Miss Havisham do not have and they must spend a lifetime expiating their fault. But why should they have to expiate a crime that was committed not by them, but against them? Perfect love, such as Agnes's 'love and truth', is a touchstone of moral worth, and their love falls below this standard.

---

1 Trollope is more robust. His Widow Greenow in *Can You Forgive Her?* marries a worthless lover with the frank expectation of a good time. V. S. Pritchett, discussing George Eliot, points out how vanity replaces more directly sexual motives in the seduction of Hetty in *Adam Bede*. (*The Living Novel* (London, 1960) pp91-94) Plainly the relationship between vanity and sexuality is complex; Pritchett's point is that George Eliot chooses to stick at vanity without analysing further.

Even if Gowan doesn't marry Pet for money, 'his high spirit found itself ... provided with money' from Pet's father's pocket. (*LD*II 33 p875). He is not so much an individual fortune-hunter as the representative of a predatory class: the tired and impoverished aristocracy refreshing itself with middle-class money. The sadness felt by Mr and Mrs Meagles when they think of the choice their daughter has made keeps them away from Arthur's wedding. It is not quite what they would feel if she had done wrong, but one senses that they are not merely disappointed for her but also somehow disappointed *in* her. Dickens does not look closely at the Gowan marriage, but leaves us with Mr Meagles's bleak comment:

> '... she's very fond of him, and hides his faults, and thinks that no one sees them – and he certainly is well connected and of a very good family!'
>
> It was the only comfort he had in the loss of his daughter, and if he made the most of it, who could blame him?
>
> (*LD* II 34 p883)

Mr Meagles's comfort is twofold, but Dickens's comment refers only to Gowan's aristocratic connections. What should we think about Pet's continued fondness for her husband? On the one hand her feelings made her give herself to an unworthy man, as Betsey Trotwood's and Miss Havisham's did, but on the other it must be a comfort to know that the marriage is not, at least as yet, entirely without affection. What was perhaps a weakness in the girl, becomes a virtue in the wife, whose duty is to stick loyally to her husband, come what may.

The marriage market

The fortune-hunter preys on unprotected women, widows or girls whose natural guardians cannot or will not manage their affairs for them. The protected female falls victim not to the lone predator, but to the institutionalised marriage-market, satirised by Ethel Newcome when she wears a 'sold' ticket on her bosom, and then attacked by Thackeray in a memorable passage in which he likens an aristocratic household forcing a daughter into a dynastic marriage to the household of a dead Brahmin forcing a child widow onto a funeral pyre, or to the sacrifice of virgins to

the devouring monster, Mammon – comparisons amply justified by the story of Lady Clara Pulleyn's marriage to Barnes Newcome.[2]

Lady Clara is docile: even when she runs away she does so in a passive, fatalistic manner. Trollope illustrates the destructive power of family coercion more vividly still when he shows the far from docile Lucinda Roanoke going mad under pressure to marry a title. The family in her case consists only of Mrs Carbuncle, an adventuress and outsider, and so the extreme inhumanity can be disowned by other participants in the marriage market – even by Lord George Carruthers, who was, nevertheless, prepared to act as best man.[3] Lady Glencora is too resilient to be broken by her forced marriage to Plantagenet Palliser, but she is morally damaged by being 'so driven that all gentleness of womanhood is driven out of [her]'.[4]

Trollope, and more particularly Thackeray, feel that the dynastic marriage, though prevalent enough in England, has something un-English about it. When not comparing it with Eastern customs, Thackeray claims that it is a typically French institution, and points a moral:

> The consequences of the system I do not pretend personally to know; but if the light literature of a country is a reflex of its manners, and French novels are a picture of French life, a pretty society must be that into the midst of which the London reader may walk in twelve hours from this time of perusal, and from which only twenty miles of sea separate us.
>
> (*The Newcomes* vol 1 ch31 p408)

There is some resemblance between Dickens's views on dynastic marriage and those of Trollope and Thackeray, but there is a different emphasis. In Dickens, as in Thackeray, the marriage market is a slave market:

> There is no slave in a market: there is no horse in a fair: so shown, and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years ... The licence to look and touch ... have I submitted to it, in half the places of resort upon the map of England? Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself?
>
> (*D&S* ch27 p473)

---

2 *The Newcomes* vol 1 ch28 pp366ff; vol 2 ch20 p271.
3 *The Eustace Diamonds* ch70 p566.
4 *Can You Forgive Her?* ch25 p232.

There is an economic context to Edith's marriage: if she were not poor, Dombey would not be able to buy her, and if she were not subject to the legal and social constraints put upon women, she would have something other than marriage open to her. But as a dramatization of the Mayfair slave-market her plight is less obviously effective than that of Clara Pulleyn and Ethel Newcome, who are coerced by dynastic pressure far more potent than that faced by Edith. Mrs Skewton and Cousin Feenix are, at least on the surface, too ineffectual to make Edith do anything against her will.

From Dombey's point of view the marriage is a bargain undertaken for the sake of Edith's beauty, pride and family, to promote his ambition to become something more than a City man. She is, and she sees herself as, a commodity, a bought woman. There is a clear comparison between her moral situation and that of Alice Marwood the prostitute. The coercion that weighs upon her is not naked dynastic power, but the steady, relentless erosion of self-respect after ten years on the market. The less satisfactory she is as a dramatization of woman as tool in the hands of her family, the better able we are to concentrate on her psychological condition as she gives herself over into Dombey's power. If Edith is, in the end, an unsatisfactory character, it is largely because we are told nothing about her ten years on the market. Dombey arrives when her self-disgust has reached the point at which she is ready to fall, but we want to know how she has been brought to this point. Dickens is baffled by her, as he is baffled by the dangerous, intractable women whom, from time to time, he was forced to turn away from Urania Cottage – women like Sesina, who, when told that she was to be dismissed

> ... threw her nightcap to one end of the room and her nightgown to the other, and proceeded very leisurely to dress herself. ... I passed her afterwards walking in a jaunty way up Notting Hill, and refreshing herself with an occasional contemplation of the shop windows.
>
> (Letter to Dr Brown, 7 November 1849)

In an earlier letter (12 August 1849) when another woman was to be dismissed, Dickens asks particularly to be told 'exactly how she goes away ... as a point of experience'. While Trollope and Thackeray hint at the idea of prostitution as a way

of characterising the Mayfair marriage-market, in *Dombey & Son* it is tempting to see Dickens using the Mayfair marriage as a metaphor by which to explore the mystery of the prostitute.

There is a curious apathy in Edith's approach to marriage which is present in other portraits of strong women making unsuitable marriages, such as Louisa Gradgrind and Estella. Both Louisa and Estella have economic motives for their marriages: Louisa wants to be in a position to help her brother, and Estella wants to free herself from Miss Havisham. These motives are plainly important, and it is possible that they are what Dickens intends us to concentrate on when judging these events, but they are not what sticks in our mind. The extraordinary lassitude and fatalism with which these women drift into marriage are what we remember. Edith's inevitable response is: 'Whatever you please ... you have only to choose', or '... he thinks it well to buy me. Let him!' (*D&S* ch27 pp471 & 473) Louisa echoes this with 'What does it matter! ... Since Mr Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal.' (*HT* I 15 p136) This is not self-sacrifice, but a careless lack of self-respect. Edith and Louisa lack that sense of their own value as women which we find in genuinely self-sacrificing women like Agnes and Biddy, and which makes Agnes appear so priggish.

Edith's complaint about her upbringing is that she was made a woman before her time and 'taught to scheme and plot when children play'. (*D&S* ch27 p473) It is the same complaint that Dickens makes about the neglect that leaves destitute children to fend for themselves on the streets, and even more emphatically about the effect of a rigid utilitarian education:

> No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! ...
>
> Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder. Bring to me, says M'Choakumchild, yonder baby just able to walk, and I will engage that it shall never wonder.
>
> (*HT* I 3 p54 & I 8 p89)

Mrs Skewton the corrupt Regency charmer and the high-minded progressive Mr Gradgrind both turn out daughters incapable of making the one moral decision upon which a woman's whole life turns.[5] The loss of childhood and the inability to fall properly in love are associated in the account of the Smallweed family, who are always 'early to go out and late to marry'. (*BH* ch21 p342)

Edith and Louisa insist that they have done nothing to encourage their suitors. Estella seems to drift no less fatalistically into her marriage with Drummle: she admits that she is deceiving and trapping him but does nothing very active, beyond dressing well and perhaps encouraging one suitor as a spur to the others. (*GE* ch38 p329) It is as though Estella, as a beautiful woman, cannot help being a snare and a deception. Dickens raises a vision of women as instruments of a vengeful manipulator, placed amongst men for the purpose of breaking their hearts. There is a further frightening possibility hiding behind Estella's economic motive, the possibility that she is helplessly attracted by Drummle's menace, as she was by Pip the blacksmith's boy who beat the pale young gentleman.

Fanny Dorrit is quite openly and actively bent on deceiving and ensnaring, but for all her activity she seems to have no strong positive expectation of making herself happy. By the time she marries Sparkler she does not even have the need for his money that she had as his mistress. She is out for revenge, like Estella and Jonas Chuzzlewit. Unlike Estella, she wants revenge on her own account; and unlike Jonas, she does not want to punish her victim, but her victim's mother, who despised her when she was poor. Lady Dedlock used 'beauty, pride, ambition, insolent resolve and sense' to win her place, suggesting that she set out with something of Fanny's aggressive purpose, but her reward is 'an exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity', reminiscent of the sinister resignation of Edith, Louisa or Estella. (*BH* ch2 pp57f)

---

5 Applied to boys, such as Tom Gradgrind or Bitzer, or Rob the Grinder or Charley Hexam, this wonder-free education produces not this moral lassitude, but rather an aggressive selfishness based on calculations relative to number one.

In all these cases where women are married off, or marry themselves off, for the sake of money, position or family convenience, the result is unhappiness. Plainly Dickens is attacking the marriage market. But considered simply as attacks on the contemporary marriage market, these accounts are less convincing than those in Trollope and Thackeray. It is only in the case of Edith that the institution of selling oneself to a husband for money is directly attacked, and even there the effect of the account as contemporary satire is blunted by being associated with Mrs Skewton, who is always portrayed as a relic from the past. Lady Dedlock's barren life is an indictment of her mercenary marriage, but its origin lies earlier, in the loss of her lover and the theft of her child. Dickens takes for granted the evil of the marriage market, and is trying to go a step further and evoke the state of mind that makes women drive themselves to market.

Unhappy homes

While deploring mercenary, forced or dynastic marriages, Trollope and Thackeray are less clear about how and from what motives young people *should* choose a marriage partner. A 'flaming love-match' is as likely to end in boredom as an arranged marriage.[6] Trollope delicately traces, across several novels, the growing affection between the ill-assorted Glencora and Plantagenet Palliser, and plainly feels that Glencora is happier, in the end, with Plantagenet than she would have been with the man she loved. The ideal solution is, of course, to have family interest, money and love all driving in the same direction: 'such a combination will always be thought pleasant.'[7] In the absence of a pleasant combination of motives it is surprising that young people ever marry. Alice Vavasor, who is troubled by a further motive, a 'vile ambition'[8] almost fails to make up her mind, and Trollope comments:

> I am inclined to believe that most men and women take their lots as they find them, marrying as the birds do by force of nature. ... Providence, if it has not done the very best for them, has done for them as well as they could do for themselves with all the

6 *The Newcomes* vol 1 ch31 p410.
7 *The Prime Minister* ch15 p119.
8 *Can You Forgive Her?* ch37 p336.

thought in the world.

(*Can You Forgive Her?* ch11 p94)

On the whole Trollope recommends the married state, and believes that decent sensible people will usually be reasonably happy in their marriages, unless, like the Trevelyans in *He Knew He Was Right*, both parties are too determined to have their own way. In Dickens unhappy marriages predominate. Sometimes, as in the case of the Bumbles, the unhappiness is due to the fact that both parties are decidedly unpleasant, but more commonly we can sympathise with at least one of the partners.

Forced marriages like Mrs Clennam's are doomed to unhappiness, and the lawful but loveless marriage of Oliver's father produces the monster Monks, while his illicit love-match produces Oliver. But it might be said that the flaming love-match between David and Dora is also unhappy, and that the wickedness of Mrs Clennam in preventing the marriage between Flora and Arthur saves them from an unhappy life together. Neither suggestion is quite conclusive. Perhaps Flora's garrulity and incoherence are an inevitable development which would have made Arthur wretched, but equally they could be the consequence of her thwarted love and the restricted life she has been forced to live with her father and with Mr F and his aunt.

As for David and Dora, certainly David repents of the marriage, but because Dora dies we can't say whether or not that would have been his final word, and in any case the unhappiness is not of the same order as the Clennams'. Whether the resulting home-life is happy or not, the spontaneity of young love is undoubtedly represented as a positive thing, and thwarting it, usually, as a negative thing – although while the young David naturally resents Mr Spenlow's interference, the mature David seems also quite critical of the silly aunts who fail to prevent the unsuitable marriage. But whether a couple fall spontaneously in love, or are forced into marriage for prudential or family reasons, or undergo the sort of neat compromise suggested by Trollope's *pleasant combination*, the conditions governing

the relations between young people dictate that in most cases couples marry as strangers.

The most flagrant case of marrying strangers is that of the Lammles, the irony being that they marry neither from passion nor under pressure from others, but in a spirit of careful, but entirely inaccurate, calculation. They fail to check the one thing that interests them, the other's income and assets. The scene where they confront each other with the truth on Shanklin Sands and reach their predatory pact portrays the loveless marriage at it bleakest: 'I cannot get rid of you; you cannot get rid of me.' (*OMF* I 10 p172) Not that things are quite as equal between them as that. In the marriage of strangers the woman is the worse off, because she is in her husband's power. 'But he has repressive power, and she has none.' (*OMF* I 10 p171) This refers to Alfred's superior self-control (he is cool, she is distraught) which enables him to dominate her, but it could equally describe his legal position.

Brute strength and legal possession give husbands all the power in a marriage, if they are willing to exercise it. Where there is not enough property to give substance to the husband's legal superiority, and where the husband is unwilling or unable to assert physical superiority, the quality of home life will be determined by the woman. Again, where there is little money there will be nothing beyond the home except work and drink. In the respectable working-class and lower-middle-class home, therefore, the wife has the power to control her husband's happiness. This theory is exemplified in the Bagnets, Plornishes and Toodleses, in all of which families the wife dominates her husband for his own good, and also in the spectacularly unhappy homes dominated by raging women such as Mrs Varden, Mrs Snagsby, Mrs Joe or Mrs Wilfer.[9]

What makes these women so angry? In two cases it is at least partly due to religion. Mrs Varden's religious infection is cured by the events of the novel, and she becomes good-natured and companionable again. In Mrs Snagsby religion

[9] One might add the Jellyby household to this list, where life is made intolerable not by bad temper but by Mrs Jellyby's concentration on things far away.

combines with meanness and suspicious jealousy, and her anger is built into her character, and into her relationship with her husband. While Gabriel Varden happens to have an unreasonable, disagreeable wife, Mr Snagsby is a husband who cries out to be hen-pecked. Without suggesting that these cruel portraits were intended by Dickens as revenge on his mother for being 'warm' for sending him back to the blacking factory,[10] it is worth noticing that these families belong to the range of social classes that he grew up amongst. Dickens knows what it is for a family to live all together in cramped surroundings, worrying about money and recalling better days.

That women's aspirations after gentility and respectability are a force for social improvement is an important article of Dickens's social faith, but, as so often with his favourite ideas, he is prepared to laugh at it, gently in the case of Mrs Plornish, and bitterly in the case of Mrs Joe and her fawning on Uncle Pumblechook. Mrs Wilfer's anger expresses itself in complaints that Mr Wilfer has brought her down in the world. She does not make it clear in what respect her father and mother were superior to Mr Wilfer, except that they were large, and hoped that she would 'become united to a tall member of society'. (*OMF* III 4 p516) Mrs Micawber also refers to better days in her family home, but gallantly refuses to hold it against her husband that he has brought her down in the world.

It is tempting to dismiss these recollections of attenuated gentility as snobbish nonsense, an individual absurdity of Mrs Wilfer or Mrs Micawber, but it may be that Dickens is registering a genuine piece of social experience. Just as millions of the urban working class were one generation or two away from peasant origins, so presumably there was a similar drift of population among the middle-class. In days of large families and financial insecurity it would not take more than two generations for descendants of a minor squire or provincial merchant to come to London, spend their small share of the patrimony and lose all but faint and distorted recollections of their genteel origin.

---

10 See the autobiographical fragment quoted in Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* I 2 p32.

> Papa also would remark to me (he possessed extraordinary humour), 'that a family of whales must not ally themselves with sprats.' His company was eagerly sought, as may be supposed, by the wits of the day, and our house was their continual resort. I have known as many as three copper-plate engravers exchanging the most exquisite sallies and retorts there, at one time.
>
> (*OMF* III 4 pp516f)

Mrs Wilfer is a magnificent grotesque, but the representation of the Wilfer family is a persuasive picture of a particular sort of poverty – the poverty of those who have had a glimpse of wealth and seen it recede. Bella thinks that it is the 'ridiculous' circumstances of her life that have given her this tantalising glimpse, but in fact it is part of the condition of her class that she should be close enough to wealth to know that she is 'degradingly poor, offensively poor, miserably poor, beastly poor'. (*OMF* I 4 p81) Her married sister Cecilia experiences the effects of poverty when, three months after her marriage, she finds (as Flora finds in *Little Dorrit*) that her husband's 'reduced aunt' must come to live in her house. Cecilia's response, reported by her mother, is Micawber-like: 'I will not leave him, I must not forget that he is my husband. Let his aunt come!' (*OMF* I 4 p79) It is details such as this that remind us of Dickens's lower middle-class origins and also of the life faced by large numbers of his readers: a life always in danger of being *reduced* by poverty, sickness and old age.

The Wilfers' unhappiness is the unhappiness of an unsuitable marriage rather than of simple penury. The big wife and small husband represent in caricature what Annie Strong, in the phrase repeatedly picked up by David, genteelly calls 'unsuitability of mind and purpose'. (*DC* ch45 p729) How do such grotesquely mismatched people come to marry? Mrs Wilfer's explanation, like everything she says, is opaque:

> Among the most prominent members of that distinguished circle, was a gentleman measuring six feet four in height. *He* was *not* an engraver. ... This gentleman was so obliging as to honour me with attentions which I could not fail to understand ... I immediately announced to both my parents that those attentions were misplaced, and that I could not favour his suit. They inquired was he too tall? I replied that it was not the stature, but the intellect was too lofty. At our house, I said, the tone was too brilliant, the pressure was too high, to be maintained by me, a mere woman, in every-day domestic life. I well remember mamma's clasping her hands, and exclaiming 'This will end in a little man!' ... She afterwards went so far as to predict that it would end in a little man whose mind would be below the average, but that

> was in what I may denominate a paroxysm of maternal disappointment. Within a month ... I first saw R.W. my husband. Within a year, I married him. It is natural for the mind to recall these dark coincidences on the present day.
>
> (*OMF* III 4 p517)

If this means anything, she married R.W. because she could not stand her parents' home and her parents' friends, and was looking for an escape. We see Lavvy doing much the same, angling to catch a man she seems to despise in order to get away from her mother.

No doubt R.W. surrendered himself as meekly as George Sampson surrenders to Lavvy. Why do young men marry these unsuitable women? Dickens doesn't profess to explain, perhaps because the obvious explanation is unmentionable. We are amazed when Bunsby marries Mrs MacStinger, but after all she is a woman, and he has shown himself peculiarly susceptible to female charms (he hugs Susan Nipper on the way to the coach: *D&S* ch23 p411). Dickens takes it simply as a comic fact that unmarried men have a propensity to fall in love. If Augustus Moddle had not escaped and made his way overseas, he and Charity Pecksniff would have turned into the Wilfers.

How fair is Dickens's account of these bad-tempered women? He offers no explanation for their discontent, beyond the feeling that their husbands have either brought them down in the world or failed to raise them up, and even this explanation is not offered as a justification. We are not encouraged to think that the ineffectual husbands are in any way to blame for their wives' rage. When Mrs Joe goads Joe to fight Orlick, we think of it as something that happens to Joe, as though her fury is part of the given, a force of nature, a fact of life. Pip's comment on this incident is carefully phrased to make it clear that it belongs both to the observant child and to the adult looking back:

> Then, came that singular calm and silence which succeed all uproars; and then, with the vague sensation which I have always connected with such a lull – namely, that it was Sunday, and somebody was dead – I went up-stairs to dress myself.
>
> (*GE* ch15 p143)

The double point of view is right: no amount of adult understanding will ever get us beyond childish incomprehension when we are confronted with the deepest

mysteries of human unhappiness. But we should not adopt childish incomprehension as an attitude too readily. Mrs Joe is the eventual victim of the day's conflict, and the calm and silence that comes on her will drag on for the rest of her life: perhaps she deserves some effort at understanding. Pip softens towards his sister, but without seeming to contemplate any specific extenuating explanation of her behaviour. Her demands for gratitude from Pip are misplaced, but that is not to say that there is no foundation for her anger. There is no encouragement to think along these lines, unless we find in the words of her mother's epitaph (*GE* ch1 p35; ch35 p300) a hint that also Georgiana Gargery has a point of view.

If we look for even-handedness between the sexes we might point to numerous brutal husbands to balance the shrewish wives, from Quilp at the demonic, fantastic end of the range, to the brickmakers in *Bleak House* at the realistic end. There is the casual, by now enfeebled, violence of Old Smallweed towards his wife. The Crunchers in *A Tale of Two Cities* reverse the position of the Vardens in *Barnaby Rudge* since Mrs Cruncher's religion is genuine, while her husband's rejection of it is violent and grotesque. But this balancing of accounts is less fair than might appear. The violent husbands are all of them unequivocally deviant, drunkards or swindlers or murderers, while the shrewish wives are, apart from their shrewishness, ordinary women. We are in more danger of regarding Mrs Wilfer as a representative wife than Jerry Cruncher the resurrection man as a representative husband.

Dickens's insistence that it is bad wives who make unhappy homes can be objected to on several grounds. First, it appears to be the other side of his equally strong view of good wives as angels – the often remarked tendency to exaggerate both the virtues and vices of women. Dickens was aware of this danger. Describing in a letter a visit to a Ragged School, he says:

> ... the girls are ... much better behaved – although they are the wretchedest of the wretched. But there is much more good in Women than in Men, however ragged they are. People are apt to think otherwise, because the outward degradation strikes them more forcibly than any amount of hideousness in a man.
>
> (Letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts September 24 1843)

Another objection is that Dickens is subscribing to the 'two spheres' doctrine which is so widely diffused throughout Victorian literature. At its best, as in *Sesame and Lilies*,[11] this doctrine insists on the seriousness of the domestic duty of securing the 'order, comfort and loveliness' of the home, and the consequent importance of women's education, but it is fatally easy for it to become a simple justification for restricting women to domesticity. Dickens has a succession of women such as Sissy Jupe, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit, who secure the loveliness of their homes, while exemplifying Ruskin's view that this function can be 'expanded' beyond the confines of the home: the home should not be closed and inward-looking, but should have room for others, as Sissy has room for Louisa, and as Amy makes herself a mother to her sister's neglected children. (*HT* III 9 p313; *LD* II 34 p895) In these parting glimpses of his heroines fulfilling what Ruskin would call their 'queenly office' Dickens could be accused of making exaggerated propaganda on behalf of the two spheres doctrine by glorifying the domestic role. His representations of dysfunctional homes are part of the same propaganda, representing the failure of women like Mrs Jellyby or Mrs Wilfer to fulfil their proper functions. But they are also straightforward pieces of social observation. Where the life of all the family is inescapably centred on the domestic hearth, and the wife is the one who has the job of domestic management, the happiness of the family depends upon her skill and tact.

The boat-house on the sands is a paradisal emblem of childhood for David, but it is also a highly inconvenient, cramped place, where the fire smokes and the potatoes are burnt, and where Emily has to give up her bedroom to make way for the young gentleman visitor. There is something seductive for Dickens in the idea that cramped and inconvenient surroundings can be transformed into a home by a 'cheerful, tidy, bustling, quiet little' woman like Ruth Pinch, who takes up housekeeping for her brother in a triangular parlour with mildewed black beetles.

---

11 See in particular §86, *Works* vol 18 p136.

(*MC* ch39 p672) But where the housekeeper is Mrs Gummidge it is hardly surprising that even Mr Peggotty needs his spell at The Willing Mind. (*DC* ch3 p89)

Stage-managed marriages

Like the Wooden Midshipman and Bleak House, the boat-house is a home whose inhabitants are not a natural family. They are brought together and held together by Daniel Peggotty's strong will, although in a home created by a man there is something lacking which can only be supplied by an affectionate woman: 'She has made a home out of that old boat, sir, that stone and marble couldn't beat,' says Mr Omer of Emily.[12] (*DC* ch30 p500) Florence and Esther 'make a home' of the Wooden Midshipman and Bleak House.

Mr Peggotty is confident that he knows Emily's thoughts and feelings when he puts a candle in the window:

> ... fur our little Em'ly. You see, the path ain't over light or cheerful arter dark; and when I'm here at the hour she's a comin' home, I puts the light in the winder. That, you see, ... meets two objects. She says, says Em'ly, 'Theer's home!' she says. And likewise, says Em'ly, 'My uncle's theer!' Fur if I ain't theer, I never have no light showed.
>
> (*DC* ch31 p511)

The path is no less in need of lighting when he is away from home than when he is there: the most unselfish of men, he still supposes that Emily's feelings must be centred on him, presumably because she repeatedly assures him that it is so. After her elopement his mind races ahead to picture and control the moment of her return:

> If ever she should come a wandering back, I wouldn't have the old place seem to cast her off, you understand, but seem to tempt her to draw nigher to 't, and to peep in, maybe, like a ghost, out of the wind and rain, through the old winder, at the old seat by the fire. Then maybe, Mas'r Davy, seein' none but Missis Gummidge there, she might take heart to creep in, trembling; and might come to be laid down in her old bed, and rest her weary head where it was once so gay. ...
>
> Every night ... as reg'lar as the night comes, the candle must be stood in its old pane of glass, that if ever she should see it, it may seem to say 'Come back, my child, come back!' If ever there's a knock, Ham (partic'ler a soft knock), arter dark, at your aunt's door, doen't you go nigh it. Let it be her – not you – that sees my fallen child!
>
> (*DC* ch31 p518)

---

12 Coming from an undertaker this comparison with stone and marble is perhaps a two-edged compliment, as though he were saying that the boat-house is better than a tomb.

He asks 'What shall I do when I see her?' and as though in answer describes what *she* will do when she sees *him*:

> on'y let my stanning still afore her bring to her thoughts of the home she had fled from, and the child she had been – and if she had growed to be a royal lady, she'd have fell down at my feet!
>
> (*DC* ch40 p651)

When he is in London, going out night after night in the hope of finding Emily, he always carefully arranges the room and lays out a dress to be ready for her. (*DC* ch46 p745) There is touching dignity in this, like Captain Cuttle's shrine, but also a sense of a man for whom, in matters of the emotions, nothing should be left to chance.

As Mrs Leavis says, Dickens has caught the sound of a morbid love, but my impression is that he does not recognise the morbidity.[13] It is hard to fix any blame upon Mr Peggotty, who is generous, self-sacrificing and brave, but there is much in his attitude that leaves us uneasy. The marriage of Emily and Ham is intended to crown Mr Peggotty's home-making efforts. It is, as everyone admits, the right tidy outcome, with a sort of inevitability about it – like the marriage of Ada and Rick, which has 'many reasons to make it desirable'. (*BH* ch13 p231) Mr Peggotty, Ham and Mr Omer negotiate an early termination of Emily's apprenticeship, to permit a hurried marriage. They ignore all signs of repugnance on her part, and think only of getting her 'settled' in a 'doll's parlour'. (*DC* ch30 p501) There is a great difference between their loving concern for Emily's happiness and the behaviour of Thackeray's Mayfair brahmins preparing their young women for sacrifice, but there is the same sense that a girl must be manipulated and her feelings overridden, for her own and her family's ultimate good.

Mr Peggotty holds his family together by force of personality and effort of will. John Jarndyce is a more volatile character, but obstinate in his way, and assisted by apparently unlimited money. Like Mr Peggotty, he gathers into his home two orphaned relatives, who he hopes will marry eventually, and a housekeeper. Ada

---

13 *Dickens the Novelist* ch2 p118.

and Richard are better suited to each other than Emily and Ham, but their marriage is doomed by Richard's fatal obsession with the great case. Ham and Emily are separated by the respectable Littimer, Ada and Richard by the respectable Vholes. By emphasising the conspicuous respectability of these villains Dickens shows how the world countenances their villainy, allowing them to thwart the dreams of unworldly benefactors.

The Cheerybles, old Martin Chuzzlewit and Mr Boffin, all help to bring about a marriage, as though people cannot marry unless it is managed for them by a presiding benefactor. Pip feels it would be entirely right if Miss Havisham were manipulating his destiny and Estella's in order to bring them together. Having failed with Ada and Rick, John Jarndyce goes on to manage the marriage of Esther and Allan. He is in a false position after proposing marriage to Esther, and extricates himself by the elaborate charade of introducing her to her 'rustic cottage of doll's rooms' and handing her over to Allan as 'a willing gift, the best wife that ever man had'. (*BH* ch64 pp912 & 915) His behaviour is reasonable, even laudable, but Dickens does more than simply approve of it in this special case: it fits a pattern of emotional stage-management with which he feels peculiarly at home.

Not all arrangers of marriages are as unselfish as John Jarndyce. Nor is it always for money that selfish parents push their children into marriage. Mrs Jellyby thinks only of her good works, and wants to marry Caddy off to Mr Quale, but is too kind or too distracted to impose her will. The relationship between Mrs Clennam's father and Gilbert Clennam hardly merits the name of friendship, but such as it is it is rooted in their twin obsessions, business and religion, and they seek to perpetuate it by the dynastic marriage that they force on their successors. The same impulse though translated into more sentimental and superficially more attractive terms, is present in the pre-plot of *Edwin Drood*: the fathers of Edwin and Rosa seek to prolong their friendship beyond the grave by proposing that their children should marry.

Much as Esther overcomes her sense of obligation to her guardian and is prevailed upon to marry the man she loves, so Rosa and Edwin realise that they need not be bound by their dead fathers' wishes. Mr Grewgious tells Edwin that 'there can be no doubt, no indifference, no half fire and half smoke state of mind in a real lover',[14] and charges him not to go through with the marriage if he is doing so 'for no higher reason than because you have long been accustomed to look forward to it'. (*ED* ch11 pp142 & 145) Influenced by this advice Rosa and Edwin abandon their proposed marriage, and 'change to brother and sister from this day forth'. (*ED* ch13 p164) It is a relief to fall into this way of thinking of each other after the false and unsustainable relationship forced upon them by their fathers.

For other couples the movement is in the other direction: Walter and Florence, and David and Agnes start as brothers and sisters but grow into lovers. Looking at Dickens's own life, and his intense feelings for his sisters-in-law, Mary and Georgina, we can guess that the idealised relationship of brother and sister intrigued him, and perhaps appeared as a solution to the endless problems of dealings between the sexes. But it would be hard to say whether he valued it as a substitute for marriage, or as a precursor to marriage: those who have been as brother and sister will not marry as strangers.

An alternative form of adolescent sexual relationship is that between 'little lovers', as Annie Strong describes herself and Jack Maldon.

> I had liked him ... very much. We had been little lovers once. If circumstances had not happened otherwise, I might have come to persuade myself that I really loved him, and might have married him, and been most wretched. There can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose.
>
> (*DC* ch45 p729)

This is one answer to the question asked earlier about how unsuitable marriages between strangers come about. People play at love and *persuade themselves* that it is the real thing. This pattern of behaviour is satirised in Augustus Moddle and Lavvy Wilfer, and in David's schoolboy flames. It is more than a laughing matter because these games often end in unhappy homes. David applies Annie's words

[14] Few of Trollope's young men would marry if they took this advice.

not to his Canterbury romances, but to his marriage to Dora, but this is a misapplication: he has not merely *persuaded himself* that he and Dora are in love. We have an unmistakable sense that there is more to the affair than is captured in Julia Mills's portentous commentaries. It is all a game for Julia, a game soon to be thrown over for the serious business of marrying money, but although Dora is silly and shallow, and David is blind, the authenticity of their feelings stands out beside Julia's pretences. In applying Annie's words about 'little lovers' to his own marriage, David is beginning the process of denial, relegating Dora to the foolish past, and preparing himself for Agnes. However unhappy he is with Dora, the comparison with Jack Maldon is unfair both to her and to himself.

When Annie explains that in the past she nearly persuaded herself that she loved Jack, it sounds as though what she is doing now is persuading herself that she loves the Doctor. We think this because we find it almost impossible to believe that she can really love him, really be satisfied as his wife. But Dickens is determined that we shall believe it. We are expected to accept Annie's description of the Doctor's face ('revered as a father's, loved as a husband's, sacred to me in my childhood as a friend's') as the expression of a possible, and indeed enviable, combination of attitudes. (*DC* ch45 p731) The fact that in his next book he recognises so emphatically that gratitude and veneration are not an adequate basis for marriage suggests that Dickens himself comes to find it incredible.

The treatment of the Strong marriage is certainly more perfunctory than later accounts of marriages between young women and elderly pedants in, for example, *Middlemarch* and Rhoda Broughton's *Belinda*. We hear about the intimacy between Annie and Agnes as something disapproved of by Mr Wickfield (*DC* ch19 p339), but we get no samples of those intimate conversations in which a different writer would have allowed Annie to articulate the complex difficulties of her situation. Dickens can convey the silliness of Dora and Julia's chatter, but does not offer us the sort of conversations we find repeatedly in Trollope, in which intelligent young women confront the contradictions in their emotional lives. The closest he comes to

this is in Fanny Dorrit's shocking explanation of her determination to marry Edmund Sparkler in order to have revenge on Mrs Merdle. (*LD* II 14) Louisa can talk to Sissy Jupe about their fathers more easily than about her husband and lover.

That a woman should be able to look up to her husband is a tormenting assumption in Charlotte Brontë and a complacent assumption in Trollope. In Annie, Dickens presses to its absurd extreme the identification of veneration and love. In a sense he makes it too easy for her by turning Maldon, the fancy of her 'undisciplined heart', into a contemptible figure. What if her 'little lover' had turned out to be manly and honourable? We are left to wonder uneasily just what is implied by the ominous idea of disciplining the heart.

There is a shadow over the Strong's marriage, which Mr Wickfield explains to himself by assuming that Annie married the Doctor for money and security, while being in love with Jack. This suspicion is intensified by her mother's constant pressure to take advantage of the Doctor's infatuation and generosity. Mrs Markleham is a brilliant embodiment of the way in which a woman's hard-edged need for security can be vulgarly dressed in the language of affection. By raising the possibility of a mercenary stain upon the marriage, and then dispelling it, Dickens draws our attention away from darker and more frightening explanations of what is wrong with Annie's marriage.

Marriage of hero and heroine

In *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit* Dickens wrote two great love stories, but he has little patience for the maze of literary courtship. In Augustus Moddle, the young David, Julia Mills and Guppy, he mocks the sort of love-making in which Trollope and Thackeray take such endless delight. Pip explicitly distinguishes his experience from 'the conventional notion of a lover'. His 'poor labyrinth' consists of loving Estella 'against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be'. (*GE* ch29 pp253f) In the conventional courtship novel of the sort of which Trollope is the great exponent,

the interest lies in the balancing and adjustment of reason, promise, peace, hope and happiness, with perhaps something else thrown in as a wild-card. In Pip's case there is only the wild-card: Estella is simply 'irresistible'.

Nor does Dickens have Trollope's interest in the chase. He carès less for courtship than for the result, the quality of the home produced by the marriage. Nonetheless, most of his novels follow the classic courtship pattern and culminate in the marriage of hero or heroine. Where the hero or heroine is too young to marry, as in the case of Oliver or Little Nell, there is a secondary couple to provide the appropriate finale. In *Our Mutual Friend* and *A Tale of Two Cities* the plot demands that the hero and heroine marry well before the end, but in both cases a reunion or rededication at the end has the effect of a second marriage.

Novels that culminate in marriage confirm our prejudice that the exciting period of people's lives comes to an end when they marry. *Waverley*, the exemplar of this sort of novel, has the idea of *settlement* at the heart of both its private and its public plot. The exciting action is an aberration: Edward and Rose settle down and order is restored. The same can be said of Tom Jones and his Sophia. If the marriages of hero and heroine that come at the end of Dickens's novels are supposed to bear the same message of social order re-established, they surely fail. Our interest is only mildly engaged by young heroes such as Nicholas and Martin, so that anything Dickens might have hoped to convey by their marriages, or by Nicholas's recovery of his father's house, is lost in the hubbub of supporting characters. Even when more engaging protagonists such as David Copperfield and Florence Dombey marry it is hard to see it as more than a personal salvation. The ending of *Little Dorrit* balances the fragility and the strength of the good marriage, but on the whole the ideal marriages of hero and heroine make a weak impression compared with the powerful impression that we get all through Dickens's work that married life is always difficult and usually unhappy.

Orwell is indignant that Dickens can devise no reward for heroes like Martin and Nicholas except 'a hundred thousand pounds, a quaint old house with plenty of ivy on it, a sweetly womanly wife, a horde of children, and no work'. Expressing surprise that Dickens finds the prospect of such a life satisfying, Orwell adds that 'no modern man could combine such purposelessness with so much vitality'.[15] However, for Dickens, the happy home is a place for important work, and his brilliant accounts of dysfunctional homes are an attack on the peculiar aimlessness that comes from being unhappy in marriage.

For many reasons, the heroes of novels are by and large people to whom things happen: as Thackeray puts it in the sub-title to *The Adventures of Philip*, the novel shows 'Who robbed him, who helped him and who passed him by'. Oliver Twist, young Martin Chuzzlewit, Nicholas Nickleby and Edward Chester, are all passive pilgrims, of interest not because of what they are or what they do, but because of how the world treats them. The world is more powerful than they are, because they are young, poor and innocent. Among the early heroes, Dick Swiveller is the only one whose passivity is a matter of character rather than circumstance, and even here the distinction is not easy to draw, since Dick's characteristic diffidence and tentativeness have much to do with his expectations from his aunt 'down in Dorsetshire that was going to die when I was eight years old, and hasn't kept her word yet'. (*OCS* ch7 p105)

Dick is the forerunner of later heroes and heroines in whom Dickens explores the ways in which economic dependence and the sheer hostility of the world oppress the young and destroy their vitality. Florence is rejected by her father and suffers nervous breakdown, David is beaten and cast out and goes through life with a sense of loss, Esther is taught to believe she should not have been born, Arthur grows up to feel himself implicated in obscure inherited guilt, Pip's first consciousness of himself is as a bundle of shivers, John Harmon buries his identity

---

15 'Charles Dickens' p125. As elsewhere in his essay, Orwell seems here to be more familiar with early than late Dickens.

to escape the impossible situation forced on him by his father. Dickens uses expressions such as *kept down*, *incomplete*, *suppression* or *loss* to describe their condition and convey their state of mind.

For David, even his love for Dora would have been 'incomplete' without Agnes's sympathy. The second marriage is the final settlement for the 'ragged way-worn boy' and puts to rest his 'heedless fancy'. (*DC* ch62 pp936f) Little Dorrit is the answer to Arthur's despairing 'What have I found!' (*LD* I 13 p207) The woman appears as the all-sufficient solution to the man's problem, and Dickens expects us to take seriously the idea that nothing matters except the love that the couple have for each other. But there are some sorts of incompleteness which cannot be repaired even by the ideal marriage. We sense that there is something wrong with the idyllic marriage of Darnay and Lucie, and in the chapter 'Drawn to the Loadstone Rock' (*TTC* II 24) we learn that Darnay has unfinished business back in France. It is only when he has been back to France, and faced and been saved from the dangers that await him there, that he can properly settle down to marriage. Marriage is a reward for struggles completed or a celebration of dangers overcome, and Darnay has taken his reward prematurely. Lucie does not play, with respect to her husband, the same all-sufficient redemptive role as Agnes and Amy, although the contrast is not so schematically neat as it might appear, because she does play the redeemer with respect to Darnay's double, and it is as a consequence of this that Darnay is rescued and brought back to her.

Dickens does not specify what it is about these women that gives them their redemptive power. David tells us that Agnes is 'calm, good, self-denying'. (*DC* ch18 p326) The phrase 'love and truth' attaches to her – even Mr Micawber uses it (*DC* ch49 p775) – but these are characterless virtues, and we want to know what makes Agnes the right woman to fill David's particular void. If the great threat to a marriage is 'unsuitability of mind and purpose' (*DC* ch45 p729) we might expect to learn something more about Agnes's mind and purpose. A facetious answer would be that two such priggish young people plainly deserve each other, but that is not

what Dickens means. A good wife, it seems, has love and truth, but needs nothing to give colour to these virtues. It is entirely credible that Agnes should, in Annie's words, persuade herself that she loves David: he brought romance to her lonely childhood, and it is in keeping with her sense of loyalty that once she has loved him she should love him all her life. It is also quite plausible that a self-centred and unhappy young man like David should accept the devotion of a self-denying woman. What is questionable is Dickens's assumption that this is a basis for the ideal marriage.

What makes Agnes's goodness so colourless, compared with the goodness of Amy Dorrit, is that we don't see her in action except within a very limited range of relationships. We see her ministering to her father and David but her other contacts are only vaguely sketched. Uriah's admiration for her is not allowed to touch her, nor even to put her in a flutter as Guppy's declaration does to Esther. (*BH* ch9 p178) Agnes's troubles are convincing enough, but her goodness cuts through them without apparent effort. Dickens makes her a schoolmistress as a ready-made, conventional solution, and we get no sense of how it might enlarge her character, as though goodness and truth are all she needs for the work of teaching. This is a cause for concern because Agnes and her moral character occupy a prominent place in the landscape of the novel, so that the lack of content in her characterization leaves a large blank.

Amy Dorrit, by contrast, is presented in a wide range of roles: the prematurely responsible little mother, the loving daughter burdened by her understanding of her father's weakness, the loyal friend, the critical observer, and the damaged product of a corrupting environment. It is perhaps because he was conscious of the weakness of his portrayal of Agnes that Dickens felt the need to write in a female character not only in *Bleak House* but also in *Little Dorrit*, both in Amy's letters and in those parts of the narrative which are seen 'with Little Dorrit's eyes'. (*LD* I 14 p208) In Esther and Amy, Dickens is not so much correcting as giving substance and particularity to the picture of the idealised woman, much as Miss Wade's

narrative offers a more circumstantial account of the unwomanly woman than we get in Rosa Dartle.

Bella Wilfer and John Harmon

One reason why love is painful is that lovers often behave badly towards each other. For writers who believe in the innocence of young lovers, this fact is hard to accept. Misunderstandings and enforced separations are more acceptable ways of expressing the miseries of love. Estella certainly behaves badly, but on the whole Dickens's heroes and heroines make themselves and each other unhappy by behaving too well. Walter Gay and Nicholas Nickleby are too scrupulous over their economic situation, while Amy, Agnes and Esther take to an extreme the convention that a woman must be reticent about her feelings.[16] Bella certainly starts off by treating Rokesmith with an anger and contempt that seem to justify Old Harmon's choice – assuming that he chose her with the malevolent intention of making his son unhappy.

> 'You were stamping your little foot, my dear, and screaming with your little voice, and laying into me with your little bonnet, which you had snatched off for the purpose,' returned her father, as if the remembrance gave a relish to the rum; 'you were doing this one Sunday morning when I took you out, because I didn't go the exact way you wanted, when the old gentleman, sitting on a seat near, said, 'That's a nice girl; that's a *very* nice girl; a promising girl!' And so you were, my dear.'
>
> (*OMF* I 4 pp85f)

With this scene in mind, it's hard not to feel that Rokesmith and the Boffins take a risk when they deceive and manipulate Bella in the way they do. It is hard too to avoid a half-feeling of disappointment that this promising girl is led in the end to acknowledge herself a grateful but unworthy wife. (*OMF* IV 13 p848) It is a capitulation of high-spirits under the overwhelming weight of virtue reminiscent of Dora's deathbed capitulation to Agnes.

---

16 Another form of torment that Dickens favours is that inflicted on Agnes and Amy, who are made the recipients of confidences from the man they love about the woman he loves. The same happens to Biddy, but at least she is not expected to cherish her rival.

Although he denounces the iniquity of depriving children of play and forcing them to grow up before their time, Dickens insists that a true and good woman should be a fully formed angel by the time she is seventeen:

> The younger lady [Rose Maylie] was in the lovely bloom and spring-time of womanhood; at that age, when, if ever angels be for God's good purposes enthroned in mortal forms, they may be, without impiety, supposed to abide in such as hers.
>
> She was not past seventeen. Cast in so slight and exquisite a mould; so pure and beautiful; that earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions. The very intelligence that shone in her deep blue eyes, and was stamped upon her noble head, seemed scarcely of her age, or of the world; and yet the changing expression of sweetness and good humour, the thousand lights that played upon her face, and left no shadow there; above all, the smile, the cheerful, happy smile, were made for Home, and fireside peace and happiness.
>
> (*OT* ch29 p264)[17]

Bella Wilfer is not a ready-made angel at seventeen. The rebellious child grows into a discontented young woman, quarrelling with her sister and lamenting the degrading, beastly poverty in which her family lives. She is as selfish and silly as Dora, and because of the harsher and more confined circumstances of the Wilfer home, her selfishness and silliness are painful, without Dora's seductive gentleness.

Bella confesses to her father that she is a 'mercenary little wretch'. (*OMF* II 8 p374) Her mercenariness appears in different ways.

> I have made up my mind that I must have money, Pa. I feel that I can't beg it, borrow it, or steal it; and so I have resolved that I must marry it.
>
> (*OMF* II 8 pp374f)

In this spirit she treats the impoverished secretary's declaration of love as preposterous (*OMF* II 13 p432), and he recognises that, had he fulfilled his father's will, he would have 'purchased her, caring nothing for me, as a Sultan buys a

---

17 It is tempting to regard Dickens's rhapsodies on young women of seventeen as mere outpourings of ill-digested sentimentality. Perhaps they are, but there are also signs in a passage like this of some careful thought. One of Dickens's lifelong projects was to wrest virtue from the serious and dull. Almost every phrase in the description of Rose Maylie is aimed at some aspect of the stereotyped image of the good domestic woman. Of course the result is only the manufacture of a rival stereotype, and Rose is too undramatized a character to provide a convincing argument for anything. The 'little offices of the table' in which we see her engaged hardly offer scope for the exercise of such wonderful virtues and charms. On the other hand, domestic life is not all 'little offices'. The first we see of Rose is in the crisis of Oliver's appearance at the house door. Old Giles would have maltreated Oliver, but Rose intervenes and the old servant rises above himself and carries Oliver upstairs 'with the care and solicitude of a woman'. (*OT* ch28 p263)

slave'. (*OMF* II 13 p429) Immediately before her confession she indulges in a playful series of extravagant fantasies of sudden wealth. Her father, though shocked by the serious avowal of mercenary intentions, is delighted by the fantasies, which present her aspirations under an entirely different light. Part of the difference is due to the remoteness of the prospects, and part to the fact that when Bella contemplates her 'cargo of sweet-smelling woods' it is not for herself but for her Pa's profit and advantage (*OMF* I 8 p374) – her dreams become as innocent as Captain Cuttle's Dick Whittington dreams on Walter Gay's behalf, or Herbert Pocket's precious woods and elephants' tusks.

When Bella parades her mercenariness before Sophronia Lammle we feel she is acting a part: she speaks 'with a languid turn of her eyes', and languor is certainly not natural to her. (*OMF* III 5 p530) The artificiality of silly young women is a stock satirical butt (for example in Fanny Squeers's tea-party (*NN* ch9)) exposing a routine set of acceptably girlish vices: coquettishness, pique, malice, vanity. This may have been partly a matter of literary convention, and partly a reflection of the lives of young women, and the pressures that made confidence difficult. As we saw in the case of Annie Strong and Agnes, Dickens does not seem able to portray a conversation in which young women might sensibly and confidentially discuss their problems. There is certainly no confidence between Bella and Sophronia. Both are pretending, but in different ways: while Sophronia is luring Bella into a trap, Bella is acting just to make an impression, to prove something about herself – and doing it without much self-assurance:

> A little vexed by a suspicion that she had spoken precipitately, and withal a little defiant of her own vexation, Bella determined not to retreat. ...
>
> ... the very grossness of this flattery put Bella upon proving that she actually did please in spite of herself. She had a misgiving that she was doing wrong – though she had an indistinct foreshadowing that some harm might come of it thereafter, she little thought what consequences it would really bring about – but she went on with her confidence.
>
> (*OMF* III 5 p531)

She is still behaving badly. Dickens's problem is to explain how this bad behaviour can exist in a girl in whom Rokesmith and the Boffins recognise so much 'womanly

and pretty' feeling. (*OMF* II 10 p389) His explanation is in terms of self-deception: 'with her giddy vanity and wilfulness she squeezed the mistrust [of Sophronia] away into a corner of her mind, and blocked it up there.' (*OMF*III 5 p530)

This aspect of her mercenariness is a pose, almost comparable with Julia Mills's desert of Sahara – or perhaps like Annie Strong's romantic adolescent game of being in love with Jack Malden. Bella's errors are complex, and the lesson that the Boffins teach her has to be of comparable complexity. It's not just a matter of making her feel revulsion against the love of money. She must learn not to love money, but without losing the generosity of spirit that expresses itself in those dreams of sudden wealth that she shares with her father during their innocent elopement. (*OMF* II 8) It is not a mechanical lesson she has to learn: she has to overcome the vanity and wilfulness that prevent her from recognising and trusting her own good feelings.

Like Pip, John Harmon loves 'against reason' (*OMF* II 13 p429), but as he is a less well realised character than Pip the basis of his love is less clear. There is nothing which explains his passion in the way Pip's sense of degradation explains the peculiar virulence of his feelings for Estella. All we know is that John's love follows on Old Harmon's malicious whim, as Pip's infatuation is stage-managed by Miss Havisham. The irony is that the malicious trick, if that is what it is, turns out so well for its victim. The idea of 'suitability of mind and purpose' in marriage is at once parodied and endorsed by Pleasant Riderhood's pre-marital negotiation with Venus over his collection of skeletons. (*OMF* IV 14 p853) John and Bella develop the idea further. They are right for each other, not in the generalised way in which two moderately agreeable young people who are thrown together are right for each other, taking, as Trollope says, 'their lots as they find them, marrying as the birds do by force of nature', nor yet in the sense of being similar in mind and temper, but because they complement each other's virtues.

John is repressed, with a 'kept-down manner' that Mrs Boffin recognises. (*OMF* II 10 p388) To some extent we have to take Mrs Boffin's word for this, because he does not exhibit the symptoms of chronic diffidence that we see in other repressed heroes. He is prompt and decisive in other people's interests, and, unlike David, Arthur and Pip, he is able to manage servants – one of the joys of the Blackheath cottage that Bella catalogues for her mother is their 'clever little servant who is decidedly pretty', which indicates a degree of satisfaction in this important aspect of housekeeping which eludes David and Dora in their doll's house. (*OMF* IV 5 p746) But if his manner does not impress us as markedly inhibited, we nonetheless see it in his decisions. He heaps mountains of earth on his own grave. When Eugene refuses to call people by their right name it is plainly in a spirit of arrogance and aggression against them; John commits this aggression against himself. His prolonged deception of Bella seems wrong to us because we think of it as putting her to the test (although she actually begs to be tried 'through some reverse' (*OMF* IV 5 p746)), but for John it is less a test of her character than a sign of his lack of self-esteem, like Esther's testing of Ada after her disfigurement. (*BH* ch37 p572) Above all, it is a precaution against committing a great wrong against her. When he is disgusted at the idea of buying her love, he is thinking less of the wrong she would commit by allowing it to happen, than of the wrong he would commit by acting the Sultan and buying her.

The objections made by 'Society' to the marriage of Eugene and Lizzie are demolished by Twemlow, and like Mortimer Lightwood we go on our way more gaily because he does it. But by putting the attack in the mouths of Lady Tippins and Mr Podsnap Dickens makes the defence too easy, and makes the marriage seem less of a *coup* than it is. For in bringing off this marriage he is not only going against Tippins and Podsnap, but also against the views of Rouncewell the Ironmaster in *Bleak House*. Rouncewell allows his son to marry a housemaid, but only on condition that the housemaid is polished up, given lessons, sent abroad, to make her fit company for the ladies of the family. Rouncewell's reasons are plain to

see and hard to deny. Will there be the necessary suitability of mind and purpose between an educated man and an uneducated wife? How will they spend their evenings together? Gissing is eloquent on the fate of 'the well-defined category of men with unpresentable wives'.[18] Dickens evades these questions, and weakens his point by doing so, much as the triumph of Dick Swiveller's love is diminished if we follow the illustrators in turning the Marchioness from an angular urchin into a simpering flirt.

Lizzie has been through Riah's hands by the time she marries Eugene, but we don't know what exactly her accomplishments are. Eugene marries her for the qualities she was born with, her imagination, compassion and beauty, and because she saves his life. When discussing the event with Podsnap, Lightwood denies that Lizzie has been a female waterman, and a factory girl, although she sometimes 'rowed in a boat with her father, ... had some employment in a paper mill'. (*OMF* IV 17 p889) These words could be taken as a bold refusal to force Lizzie into any category, or it could be that Lightwood and Dickens are being evasive: Lightwood because he resents the impertinence of his questioner, and Dickens because he is unwilling to commit himself to the idea that it is in general a good thing for gentlemen to marry real factory girls. When Podsnap uses words like *female waterman* and *factory girl* he is not using them as neutral social categories. He almost certainly intends to connect a heavy suggestion of loose morals with these terms. All the same what enables her to rescue Eugene and win his hand is precisely her sordid upbringing on the river.

And so it is with Bella. What makes her the right wife for John Harmon is not the meekness and humility with which she recognises her errors, nor her frugality and cheerfulness during the Blackheath idyll, nor even her courage in believing in her husband, but above all her high-spirits and self-assertiveness – just the things that made Old Harmon think her 'promising'. These are the qualities which the self-doubting and self-denying John Harmon lacks. Not that Dickens makes this

18 *New Grub Street* (1891; Harmondsworth, 1968) ch8 p133.

point at all clearly. Bella is his most promising heroine, but he remains to the end vague, one might say cagey, about his ideal of womanhood. He can't bring himself to give us one of the new young women who were coming into the novels of the 1860s (although we don't know what Helena Landless was to do in *Edwin Drood*). The conventional image is, in the end, too strong:

> Mr Boffin, submitting to be led on tiptoe to the nursery door, looked in with immense satisfaction, although there was nothing to see but Bella in a musing state of happiness, seated in a little low chair upon the hearth, with her child in her fair young arms, and her soft eyelashes shading her eyes from the fire.
>
> (*OMF* IV 13 p849)

The conclusion of Bella's story celebrates not only motherhood, but also, in tones reminiscent of the fantasies of the innocent elopement, the wealth that she longed for so passionately:

> And on Bella's exquisite toilette table was an ivory casket, and in the casket were jewels the like of which she had never dreamed of, and aloft on an upper floor was a nursery garnished as with rainbows ...
>
> (*OMF* IV 13 pp848f)

It is hard not to see in this an endorsement of her passion.

When the Boffins are looking for words to express their sense of Bella's fundamental goodness they say, 'she's the true golden gold at heart'. (*OMF* IV 13 p843) There is, of course, a distinction here between physical gold, which is dross, and metaphorical gold, the true gold of moral worth, the golden character which is as far above the rest of humankind as gold is above all other metals, but the metaphorical meaning of gold gets its power not from an abstract analogy but from the excitement, glamour and downright desirability of gold the metal. And yet, have we not seen throughout Dickens's work gold represented as dangerous, corrupting those who seek it and those who have it? The use of the word *gold* in this context is either thoughtless and conventional or extremely surprising. Throughout *Our Mutual Friend* gold is associated with moral and physical filth, but the solution is not to renounce it but to take it and use it well.

This is what the Boffins try to do, and they experience many of the difficulties in the way of using money well which have beset the benefactors in earlier novels.

The problems of society are too large and complex for their means. They are beset by unworthy claimants to their charity, and misunderstood and calumniated by those they try to help. Despite the difficulties, they are 'effacing the old rust and tarnish on the money'. (*OMF* II 13 p429) In the end they devote the fortune to creating for Bella the home of her dreams, returning it, in fact, to the purpose originally intended by Old Harmon. They expensively re-furnish a gloomy mansion, as Mr Dombey does in his pride and folly, and they buy incomparable jewels for Bella, as Mr Merdle does to display on his wife's bosom. For the Boffins this extravagance does not lead to madness, ruin and suicide: instead it's as if the old man's spirit had found rest, and his money 'turned bright again after a long long rust in the dark, and was at last beginning to sparkle in the sunlight'. (*OMF* IV 13 p849) This is an extraordinary conclusion to a work which (whether we think of *Our Mutual Friend* or of Dickens's work as a whole) is so full of attacks on money in all its forms.

This is, of course a fairytale solution, the unearthing of treasure which has been, morally speaking, hidden for so long. The marriages of John and Bella and Eugene and Lizzie are both fairytale marriages, with Mrs Boffin and Jenny Wren playing the part of fairy godmother. Talking of such an element in Dickens's work might seem to derogate from its moral seriousness and insulate it from the real world, as though we could gloss over the surprising picture of gold gleaming in the sunlight by ascribing it to fairyland. But in fact fairytales need to have some sort of bite on social reality. Traditional fairytales belong to an age in which the everyday experience of arbitrary power and the widespread belief in the supernatural prepared the audience for sudden danger and miraculous escape. Dickens's fairytales are set firmly in the world of the English lower-middle-class, and his miracles have to carry conviction in terms of their experience and preconceptions. For the most part he creates danger for his characters through the agency of their own and other people's obsessions, and engineers the miraculous through the agency of very good people. In both the danger and the miracles money plays its

part. Even if we think of Dickens as a fairytale writer (and certainly there is that element in his work) Mrs Boffin's fairy gold gleaming in the sunlight is still the gold that came from the Mounds, the gold that Wegg coveted and that Old Harmon used to dominate and crush his children.

Conclusion

We can draw the trite and inoffensive conclusion that for Dickens money is good or bad depending on how it is used, but this does no justice to the power and complexity of the part played by money in his books. Money is the most real thing in our lives, and yet also the most insubstantial, the stuff of dreams. It is a terrible, mysterious destroyer, and yet also a familiar friend that we love to handle and talk and joke about. It imprisons us and it sets us free. The paradoxes about money to be found in the novels can be multiplied, but neither separately nor together do they amount to Dickens's 'view of money'. He was as passionately interested in money as Bella Wilfer, both the money he earned to keep his three households afloat and the money that Angela Burdett-Coutts dispensed to house the poor and reclaim the fallen. He also lived in a society which, for good or ill, was excited by money. It is inevitable that money should be a constant presence in his work and an important factor in the formation and expression of moral character.

Of all the ways in which money dominates social life, the mercenary marriage is the most offensive to the romantic and individualistic mind. It corrupts what should be pure, constrains what should be free, and makes public what should be intensely private. Of course, Dickens is against it, but perhaps not quite in the way or to the extent that we might expect. If, as Grahame Smith says, money is the 'controlling principle' of the fictional worlds that Dickens creates as 'a comprehensive critique of nineteenth century life',[19] we would expect the evils of the mercenary marriage to dominate his account of marriage, but this is not what we find. Dickens's fundamental criticism of marriage practice is that we marry

19 *Dickens, Money and Society* ch9 p221.

without love and understanding: the mercenary marriage is one of several ways in which this comes about.

And this reflects what I have found throughout my reading of Dickens. We should not push anything into the position of *controlling principle*. What I have tried to do is to give an account Dickens's contribution to the social thinking of his time, without pressing any claim that he is a systematic social critic, and without allowing the quest for social messages to dominate my reading of the novels. For this purpose the topic of money has been well suited. Some of Dickens's funniest writing is about money, and it satisfies his love of melodrama and fairytale. At the same time, money is an inescapably moral topic, and a dominant feature in contemporary society. It penetrates every part of Dickens's work and exercises every aspect of his imagination. What I have tried to do is to bring out the variety of ways in which money influences action and forms character, while placing the money themes within the context of other themes, so as not to distort the balance of the novels.

To abandon grand social themes and celebrate gargoyles rather than architecture, as I have tended to do throughout this thesis, is not to dismiss Dickens as 'mere' entertainer or to suggest that the social and moral elements in his work are incidental. I have represented him as a writer thoroughly involved in the social debates of his day, who uses his novels to explore the issues and advocate his views. He is not always right, and he has no unique insight into the moral state of his society, but, when his sympathies and imagination are engaged, he is a moral writer of great power. An important part of his power as a moralist lies in his creation of good people – not just the very good characters like Agnes and Captain Cuttle, whom anyone might appreciate, but characters like Snagsby and Flora Finching. It takes greater insight to make us see that they too are good people.

There are, above all, two aspects of Dickens's writing that persuade me that it is safest to avoid the pursuit of grand unifying themes. First there is his

disconcerting, perhaps irresponsible, use of irony. The marriage of John and Bella is a case in point. It originates in the spitefulness of Old Harmon, and is engineered by the power of his money, and yet it is the perfect match, which makes it at best a surprising stick to choose for beating the mercenary marriage. Secondly, terms like *controlling principle* and *comprehensive critique* seem to me to belong to literature's wholesale department. I come back to the Uncommercial Traveller's comment on large railway hotels in 'Refreshments for Travellers': 'there is a lingering personal retail interest within us that asks to be satisfied.' (*UT* VI p60) It is this retail interest that Dickens satisfies.

Bibliography

Standard abbreviations are used in the text to refer to Dickens's works. Except where indicated, references to Dickens are to the Penguin English Library / Penguin Classics editions (Harmondsworth, 1965 to 1995).

American Notes, edited by J. S. Whitely & A. Goldman. No date.
Barnaby Rudge, edited by G. Spence. 1973.
Bleak House, edited by N. Page. 1971.
David Copperfield, edited by T. Blount. 1966.
Dombey & Son, edited by P. Fairclough. 1970.
Edwin Drood, edited by A. J. Cox. 1974.
Great Expectations, edited by A. Calder. 1965.
Hard Times, edited by D. Craig. 1969.
Little Dorrit, edited by J. Holloway. 1967.
Martin Chuzzlewit, edited by P.N. Furbank. 1968.
Miscellaneous Papers, edited by B. W. Matz. London, 1908.
Nicholas Nickleby, edited by M. Slater. 1978.
Old Curiosity Shop, edited by A. Easson. 1972.
Oliver Twist, edited by P. Fairclough. 1966.
Our Mutual Friend, edited by S. Gill. 1971.
Pickwick Papers, edited by R. L. Patten. 1972.
Reprinted Pieces and *The Uncommercial Traveller*. Oxford Illustrated Dickens. London, 1968.
Sketches by Boz, edited by D Walder. 1995.
Somebody's Luggage in *Dickens's Shorter Fiction*, edited by D. A. Thomas. 1976.
Tale of Two Cities, edited by G Woodcock. 1970.

All the Year Round (unattributed) 'A Plea for Coal Miners', 12 May, 1860.

— 'Poor Law Doctors', 8 December, 1860.

— 'Hail Columbia – Square!', 7 June, 1862.

— 'An Act of Mercy', Part 1, 20 December, 1862; Part 2, 27 December, 1862.

— 'Parish Charities', 23 May, 1863.

— 'A Lesson Well Learnt', 14 May, 1864.

— 'The Lives and Deaths of the People', 8 October, 1864.

— 'The Steam's Highway', 18 March, 1865.

— 'Accommodation', 8 April, 1865.

Bagehot, W. 'Charles Dickens' *National Review* (1858) vol 7 pp458-86. (Quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* pp390-401.) Re-printed in *Literary Studies*, London, 1911 (2 volumes).

— 'Memoir of the Right Hon James Wilson', *The Economist*, 17 November 1860. Re-printed in *Literary Studies*.

Best, G. *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75.* 1971; paperback edition, London, 1979.

Braddon, M.E. *Lady Audley's Secret.* 1861; Oxford, 1987.

— *Vixen.* 1879; Stroud, 1993.

— *The Fatal Three.* London, 1888.

Bradley, I. *The Call to Seriousness.* London, 1976.

Brontë, C. *Shirley.* London, 1849.

— *Villette.* London, 1853.

Brough, B. R. & Yates, E. H. 'Hard Times (Refinished)', in *Our Miscellany* (1857) pp142-156. (Quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage,* pp309-313.)

Broughton, R. *Not Wisely But Too Well.* 1867; Stroud, 1993.

— *Belinda.* 1883; London, 1984.

Butt, J. & Tillotson, K. *Dickens at Work.* London, 1957.

Carey, J. *The Violent Effigy.* 1973; 2nd edition, London, 1991.

Carlyle, T. *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays.* London, 1899 (5 volumes).

Checkland, S. G. *The Rise of Industrial Society in England 1815-1885.* London, 1964.

Chesterton, G. K. *Charles Dickens.* London, 1906.

— *The Victorian Age in Literature.* London, 1913.

Cockshut, A. O. J. *The Imagination of Charles Dickens.* London, 1961.

Collins, P. *Dickens and Crime.* London, 1962.

Collins, P. (ed) *Dickens: the Critical Heritage.* London, 1971.

Collins, W. *The Woman in White.* London, 1860.

— *The New Magdalen.* 1873; Stroud, 1993.

Craik, Mrs D. *John Halifax, Gentleman.* London, 1856.

— *Sermons out of Church.* London, 1881.

Dvorak, W. 'Dickens's Ambivalence as Social Critic in the 1860s: Attitudes to Money in *All the Year Round* and *The Uncommercial Traveller*', *Dickensian* vol 80 (1984) pp89-104.

Dyson, A. E. (ed) *Dickens: Modern Judgements.* London, 1968.

Edwards, A. B. *Half a Million of Money.* Serialised in *AYR,* 1865.

Eliot, G. 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review,* July 1856.

— *The Mill on the Floss.* 1860; Oxford, 1980.

Engels, F. *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844,* translated F.K. Wischnewetzky. London, 1892.

Ford, G. H. & Lane, L. (edd) *The Dickens Critics.* Ithaca, NY, 1961.

Forster, J. *The Life of Charles Dickens.* 1872-74; edited A J Hoppé, London, 1966 (2 volumes).

Frederickson, G. M. & Spackman, S. G. F. 'State and Society in the Gilded Age'. Commonwealth Fund Lecture in American History, University College, London, 19 February 1988. Unpublished copy by courtesy of Dr Spackman.

Gaskell, E. *Mary Barton*. 1848; London, 1906.

— *North and South*. 1855; London, 1906.

Gilmour, R. *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890*. London, 1993.

Gissing, G. *New Grub Street*. 1891; Harmondsworth, 1968.

Greene, G. 'The Young Dickens', in *The Lost Childhood*. London, 1951.

Goldberg, M. *Carlyle and Dickens*. Athens, Ga, 1972.

Gross, J. & Pearson, G. (edd) *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*. London, 1962.

Gross, J. 'Dickens: Some Recent Approaches', in Gross & Pearson, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*. London, 1962.

Halliday, A. 'Exceedingly Odd Fellows', *AYR*, 16 April, 1864.

— 'My Account with Her Majesty', *AYR*, 5 March, 1864.

Hammond, J.L. & B. *The Town Labourer*. 1917; London, 1937.

Hardy, B. *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*. London, 1985.

Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. 1891; London, 1912.

Harvey, W. J. 'Chance and Design in *Bleak House*', in Gross & Pearson, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*. London, 1962.

Herst, B. F. *The Dickens Hero: selfhood and alienation in the Dickens world*. London, 1990.

Hobsbaum, P. *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*. London, 1972.

Hobsbawm, E. J. *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*. London, 1975.

Hollingshead, J. 'Convict Capitalists', *AYR*, 9 June, 1860.

— 'Very Singular Things in the City', *AYR*, 14 July, 1860.

House, H. *The Dickens World*. 1941; 2nd edition, London, 1942.

Jewsbury, G. *The Half Sisters*. 1848; Oxford, 1994.

Johnson, E. *Charles Dickens his Tragedy and Triumph*. Boston, 1952 (2 volumes).

Johnson, E. (ed) *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 1841-1865*. London, 1953.

Kitton, F. G. *Charles Dickens: his life, writings and personality*. London, 1902.

Lambert, R. 'Central and Local Relations in Mid-Victorian England: the Local Government Act Office, 1858-71', *Victorian Studies*, December 1962, pp121-150.

Leavis, F. R. & Q. D. *Dickens the Novelist*. London, 1970; Harmondsworth, 1983.

Lehmann, R. C. *Charles Dickens as Editor*, London, 1912.

Lewes, G. H. 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, February 1872 pp141-154. (reprinted in Ford & Lane, *The Dickens Critics* pp54-76.)

Lucas, J. *The Melancholy Man*. Brighton, 1970; 2nd edition 1980.

Marcus, S. *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey*. London, 1965.

— *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class*. London, 1974.

Meason, M. R. L. 'Promoters of Companies', *AYR*, 12 March, 1864.

— 'How we "Floated" the bank', *AYR*, 31 December, 1864.

— 'How the Bank came to Grief', *AYR*, 25 February, 1865.

— 'Wanted to Borrow, One Hundred Pounds', *AYR*, 11 March, 1865.

— 'How the Bank was Wound up', *AYR*, 15 April, 1865.

— 'Going into Business', *AYR*, 13, 20 and 27 May, 1865.

— 'Insurance and Assurance', *AYR*, 3 June, 1865.

— 'The Bank of Patagonia (Limited)', *AYR*, 17 June, 1865.

— 'How I Discounted my Bill', *AYR*, 8 July,1865.

Morley, H. 'Ceres at Dockhead', *AYR*, 3 March, 1860.

Newsom, R. '*Villette* and *Bleak House*: Authorizing Women', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (electronic edition) vol 46 No 1.

Oliphant, M. 'Charles Dickens', *Blackwood's Magazine* vol 77 (1855) pp451-466. (Quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* pp327-336.)

— *The Curate in Charge*. 1875; Stroud, 1987.

Oppenlander, E. A. *Dickens's* All the Year Round*: Descriptive Index and Contributor List*. New York, 1984.

Orwell, G. 'Charles Dickens' (1939), in *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays*. Harmondsworth, 1965.

Pritchett, V. S. *The Living Novel*. 1946; London, 1960.

Reade, C. *Put Yourself in His Place*. 1870; London, 1902.

Ruskin, J. *Complete Works*, edited by E.T. Cook & A. Wedderburn. London, 1903-1912 (39 volumes).

Smiles, S. *Self Help*. 1859; London, 1882.

Smith, G. *Dickens, Money and Society*. Berkeley, Ca, 1968.

Steig, M. *Dickens and Phiz*. London, 1978.

Stephen, J. F. 'The Licence of Modern Novelists', *Edinburgh Review* vol 106 (1857) pp124-156. (Quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* pp367-374.)

— 'Mr Dickens as a Politician', *Saturday Review*, 3 January 1857. (Quoted in Collins, *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* pp344-349.)

Thackeray, W. M. *The Newcomes*. 1855; London, 1911.

Thurley, G. *The Dickens Myth, its Genesis and Structure*. London, 1976.

Tresize, S. 'The Making of Dickens: Three Themes in the Criticism of 1837-1939' *Dickens Quarterly* vol 10 (1993) pp161-170.

— 'The Making of Dickens: Aspects of Biographical Criticism', *Dickens Quarterly* vol 11 (1994) pp26-35.

— 'The Making of Dickens: The Evolution of Marxist Criticism', *Dickens Quarterly* vol 11 (1994) pp127-137.

Trollope, A. *Can You Forgive Her?* 1864; London, 1989.

— *He Knew He Was Right*. 1869; London, 1994.

— *Phineas Redux*. 1873; London, 1990.

— *The Eustace Diamonds*. 1873; London, 1990.

— *The Prime Minister*. 1876; London, 1991.

— *An Autobiography*. 1883; London, 1923.

Trollope, F. *The Vicar of Wrexhill*. London, 1839.

— *The Widow Barnaby*. 1839; Stroud, 1995.

Wain, J. *'Little Dorrit'*, in Gross & Pearson, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*. London, 1962.

Welsh, A. *The City of Dickens*. Oxford, 1971.

Westland, E. & Tresize, S. 'Dickens and Critical Change', *Dickens Quarterly* 1992-1995. *See references to individual articles.*

— 'Plotting Critical Positions', *Dickens Quarterly* vol 9 (1992) pp172-180.

Westland, E. 'The Making of Dickens: Conflicts in Criticism 1940-1970', *Dickens Quarterly* vol 10 (1993) pp208-218.

— 'Dickens and Women', *Dickens Quarterly* vol 11 (1994) pp187-196.

— 'Critical Contexts', *Dickens Quarterly* vol 12 (1995) pp123-133.

White, W. H. *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance.* London, 1893.

Wilson, E. 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges'. 1941; reprinted in *Eight Essays*, NY, 1956.

Young, G. M. *Victorian England: portrait of an age*. 1953; London, 1969.